Walton Ford

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Walton Ford by Andrés Reséndez

ANDRÉS RESÉNDEZ
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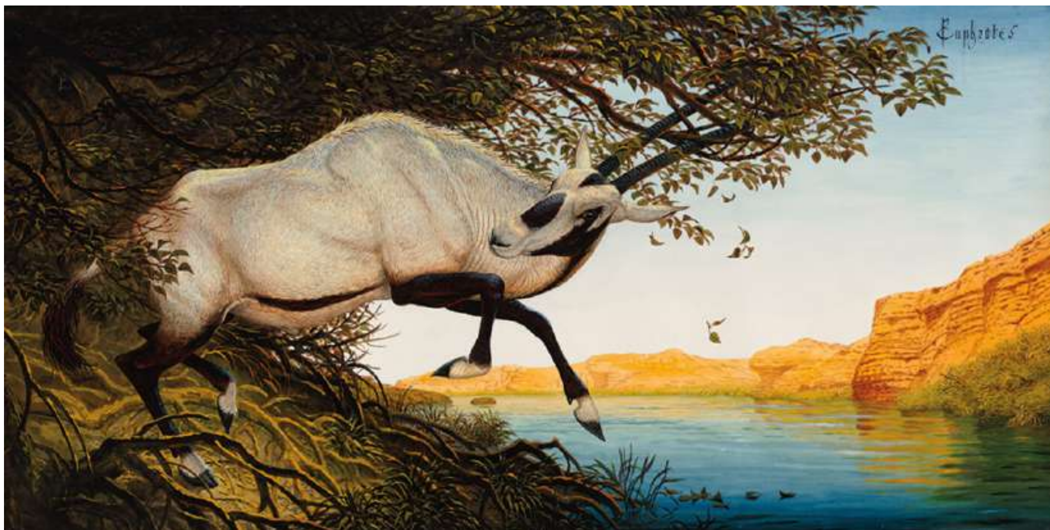


Euphrates, 2020, watercolor, gouache, and ink on paper, 60 × 119.5 inches.
Courtesy of the artist and Gagosian Gallery. Photo by Tom Powel.

The invitation from BOMB Magazine came out of the blue. Their editor Benjamin Samuel wanted me—a garden-variety historian—to interview the painter Walton Ford. I had never heard of Walton or his work, and the notion of going into a virtual room with a complete stranger from a vastly different field for a free-flowing exchange struck me as suspicious or even potentially disastrous. I feared lack of connection and awkward silences. Benjamin reassured me that the interview would be conversational in nature; he told me that Walton had read *A Land So Strange*, my book about the last four survivors of a disastrous Spanish expedition to Florida in the 1520s, and that our respective works shared themes about the natural world and colonialism. In hindsight, I should never have hesitated. It was hugely encouraging to learn that painters and historians have similar obsessions, fears, and hopes, and that working with colors and canvas to explore the human condition is not terribly different from examining old letters and books and trying to make sense of it all over a word processor.
—Andrés Reséndez

Andrés Reséndez
As the son of a marine biologist and as a historian, I am blown away by the anatomical precision of the animals in your work. How do you go about finding your subject—does the history come first or the image?

Walton Ford
Usually, the history and reading come first. I get interested in a particular region or animal. For example, I decided to make a show in Los Angeles about California, so I started to research different animals there. I had books about the

California grizzly bear, which was hunted during the Spanish colonial era and is now extinct. So, I'm reading all this Spanish colonial literature—things about the missions, things about the trade in leather hides—and finding out all this stuff surrounding the grizzlies.

One of the paintings for the California show is called La Madre (2017). It shows a female California grizzly coming out of a cave; she's a sow protecting her young, very dangerous. She's King Kong-sized, in my mind the sort of baleful, ghostly spirit of all the slaughtered grizzlies. In the background of the painting is a mission with smoke, and you see a group of caballeros on horseback, chasing and roping younger grizzlies, which I found out was a sport in colonial California. It's insane to think they considered that a fun thing to do in your off time. My giant Madre bear has tattered ropes all over her, like Moby Dick. She's been roped many times but never captured, never subdued. Her spirit is undaunted. These are sort of fantastic metaphors that come out of concrete history. I read primary sources when possible. And then I come up with something that is not contained in the primary source, something that comes out of a hypnogogic dream place. And that is the image. At least that's the goal.

AR
I imagined that.

There were many grizzlies in early California because the local Spanish population raised cattle for the tallow and often dumped the carcasses, driving a boom in the bear population.

You seem to have a great delight in words. The quotes or passages that appear in your paintings, and the situations you choose, I find very engaging. I mean, there's a lot of boring history out there, but you seem to be able to pick the really exciting, interesting, curious, or bizarre morsels. How do you do that?

WF
I do believe that I take a more literary approach to making art than many other artists do. While I was at the Rhode Island School of Design, I also made friends up at Brown. One of my closest friends there was Jeff Eugenides. He would suggest books for me to read and tell me what he was excited about. When I was a kid, comic books were a big influence, and so were movies. I initially studied film at RISD because I wanted to tell stories. I turned out to be an untalented film student, so I continued to paint instead.

The juicy bits that I find in history, I think are simply because of my subject, which is how humans interact with non-domestic animals, how animals live in the human imagination, how humans use animals as metaphors for their own insecurities.

Killy, 2019, six-plate aquatint etching with dry point, hard ground, spit bite, 29.5 × 22.5 inches.
Courtesy of the artist and Kasmin Gallery. Photo by Wingate Studio.

AR
Plants and animals have long been protagonists in human affairs. They determine how fast human populations expand and where we choose to live; overhunting and overfishing them can lead to economic booms and busts. And we become infatuated with some of them.

WF
I did an entire show about Barbary lions, which are the most magnificent lions; they lived in what is now Morocco. With their gigantic manes and huge bellies of hair, they became our archetypical lion from the Roman era on. European peoples obsessively stalked this lion from the moment they laid eyes on it. In the Roman amphitheaters, gladiators and prisoners fought with these lions. We made the lion into a symbol of nobility and might, like in medieval heraldry. We never quit using the lion—to their great detriment. The Barbary lion is now extinct in the wild and has only a little bit of genetic material lingering here and there.

AR
Now that you've talked about the historical aspect, let me go to the biological and environmental parts of your work. I relate very much to your paintings because my own father was an ichthyologist—a specialist on fish. He would catch the fish, put them under the microscope, count the scales in order to identify the species, and then he would have an artist illustrate them to accompany his scientific articles. Your work, for me, is very reminiscent of that type

of illustration. I imagine that, growing up, you might have had a similar experience, concerned with the natural world.

WF
Yeah, but it was not so scientific. My father was an avid trout fisherman. One of the reliable ways to get positive attention from my sometimes-difficult father was to draw brook trout for him. You know, the sort of ducks over a marsh type of picture. (*laughter*) This kind of sportsman art that I grew up with later mixed with the taxonomic type of drawings that you're talking about. My family valued the elegant sportsman—fly fishermen or my uncle hunting duck with dogs, retrievers that were trained to get the duck and bring it back. Because my family was originally Southern, they valued this sort of manorial hunting tradition, and part of that was to be a good amateur naturalist. We had many natural history books in the house, like the Peterson Field Guides. And those were my first teachers. When I was ten, I knew the names of great natural history artists like Louis Agassiz Fuertes and Edward Lear, who also wrote *The Owl and the Pussy-Cat*. I was very interested in Charles R. Knight, who reconstructed prehistoric beasts. His reconstructions ended up in *King Kong*. So, I was a nerd and I felt great pride in being able to identify birds, or animal tracks in the snow in our suburban area.

La Madre, 2017, watercolor, gouache, and ink on paper, mounted on aluminum panel, 108 × 144 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Gagosian Gallery. Photo by Tom Powel.

AR
Whereabouts did you grow up?

WF
In Westchester County, New York. And when I was a teenager in the Hudson Valley, there were some little patches of woods here and there, and places to swim and fish. But my father left when I was eleven and my mom had four kids in school. We were in a very affluent part of suburban New York without any money at all. I didn't have things that a lot of other kids had. We didn't go on skiing trips; we didn't get on airplanes and go places, so I explored and

did what I could do in the local woods. I hitchhiked up to the White Mountains and went fishing. That was how I got by, and it didn't cost anything. (*laughter*)

AR
What were you drawing and painting during that time?

WF
Even early on, I was making false Audubons, for my own pleasure. They were all fucked up. I would take a particular plate from the Audubon portfolio and amplify it in some weird way. Audubon painted a sparrow hawk with a sparrow. But I made a painting with a sparrow hawk sitting on top of a huge pile of sparrows because this was how Audubon went about shooting birds. He was insatiable. He shot birds off the deck of ships. People say, "Oh, he shot birds because he was studying them." No! He shot them without collecting them. He talks about raking them up into big piles on the beach and counting them, saying, "We had a great day, we shot 500 birds today." This idea of him as a conservationist is bullshit; it's something we put on him. He was just thinking like any frontiersman.

AR
Yes, our ideas of conservation have evolved a lot since Audubon in the late nineteenth century.

You mentioned California, and the very impressive lions of North Africa. Flipping through some of your paintings, I sense that you are interested in a dialogue between East and West. I am writing a book about the very first expedition that went from the Americas to Asia and back in the middle of the sixteenth century. I find many echoes of that history in your paintings. How did the Asian part of your repertoire come to be?

WF
The Portuguese and Spanish presence there.

AR
Yeah. Magellan and his men were the first to go from Europe to Asia by way of the Americas during the famous circumnavigation voyage that was completed in 1522. The few men who returned to Europe had to do it the long way, by rounding India and Africa. It would take several tries before the Spanish living in the Americas were able to go across the Pacific and also get back through the Pacific.

I am intensely interested in these exchanges between East and West. California was part of the return voyage—every year, these galleons went from Acapulco to the Philippines and then returned via the North Pacific along the coast of California. Some of the people in California that you mentioned having fun with the grizzlies, and their ancestors, had access to Chinese pottery and silks or Indian cotton fabrics, et cetera.

WF
Well, that's exactly the stuff I'm fascinated with. Because in these moments of exploration and trade, not only artifacts and goods are exploding on the scene but animals as well. I made a painting titled *The Loss of the Lisbon Rhinoceros* (2008). In the early sixteenth century, the Portuguese got this Indian rhinoceros, put it on a ship, and brought it to Europe. It was unloaded in Lisbon and displayed for a bit. Somebody made a small drawing of it. Then the rhinoceros was put back on the ship and sent to Pope Leo as a gift. Leo already had an elephant, Hanno. Anyhow, the ship with the rhinoceros on board sunk in the Mediterranean. Albrecht Dürer had gotten ahold of the sketch and a description of the animal and made a fanciful print of it. I did a painting based on Dürer's image. Dürer

had heard that the Indian rhino appeared to be armor-plated. His interpretation was to look at lobsters and crustaceans—exoskeletons—and create a rhinoceros that had carapaces. It's ironic that the animal drowned and then emerges as this immortalized image, the only rhinoceros image people in Europe have for the next 300 years. It looks like the Creature from the Black Lagoon.

AR
A cross between a lobster and a rhinoceros.

WF
The moment that this animal becomes art history is the moment it dies, as it's sinking beneath the waves. So that's the painting I made, the moment of immortality for this animal.

What I'm trying to say is that at the first moment of transcontinental exposures and interactions, animals came along with the silks and spices and all the rest. They became traded in the same way—and yet they're beings. They're not cultural objects. They're beings with internal lives, their own ideas for the future, or whatever the hell that rhinoceros was experiencing on the deck of that ship.

Rhinoceros by Albrecht Dürer, drawing, 1515.

AR
You also lived in Asia for a while, correct?

WF
In 1995, my wife got a fellowship to study tantric art in India. We had a one-year-old child, but we said, "What the hell; we'll go." It was a traveling fellowship for six months, so we traveled all over India, living in guesthouses. We then settled in Varanasi and really studied the place. My daughter's first words were in Hindi—she had playmates along the Ganges on the ghats.

During the first three months, I didn't understand what I was seeing. I would lose my temper. I would become impatient, harried. You know, people are coming up all the time: What is your good name? How much does that watch cost? Where are you staying? I was like, Please leave me alone. I thought I was going to be invisible and take National Geographic photographs in my mind. I didn't realize that the minute I showed up in a small Indian village, everybody would be crowding around us. Most people were very kind and giving, others were trying to sell me something, and there was rarely hostility. But total confusion on my part. I was so unenlightened, so unable to manage, and so foolish in many of my interactions that I just became completely humbled.

Then, by the last three months, giving in to the whole flow of it, I had a wonderful time. I no longer wanted to change India. (*laughter*) I was like, there's a billion people here and they've been here for thousands of years. They are the only people I can think of on this planet who have an ancient, continuous, complex, urban culture that hasn't been broken completely. Nobody wears a toga in Rome, there are no Pharaohs left in Egypt, but in India, they're doing puja on a ghat in a way that the Buddha would recognize. So I was like, I've got something to learn here.

The Loss of the Lisbon Rhinoceros, 2008, watercolor, gouache, pencil, and ink on paper, in three panels, total: 98.25 × 148.25 inches.
Courtesy of the artist and Kasmin Gallery.

AR
One of the things that I've become quite fascinated by in India is that it is one of the two places where coconuts were domesticated. Coconuts originated around India. Their other place of origin is the Pacific, around Southeast Asia, and yet these Pacific coconuts show up on the American continent. At least by 1515 when the Spanish conquistadores—

WF
Wow. The same time this rhino was on the move, actually!

AR
Yeah. (*laughter*) So how do we interpret that? How come the first conquistadores are already running into Asian coconuts on the Pacific coast of Panama? One theory is that they were transported by Polynesians a couple of

centuries earlier. Coconuts were like the Swiss Army knife of Pacific colonization. I mean, from coconuts you get water, flesh, alcohol, you can make utensils, thatch for houses, timber, et cetera. I read a chronicle about the Philippines—where coconuts have been around for 20,000 years—that describes an entire ship made of coconuts, including the sails. The cargo of rugs was also made out of coconuts, and the provisions for the crew were coconuts. One tree made the entire ship, the cargo, and the provisions.

Anyway, while you're more focused on animals and plants, the natural world of India, or Asia more broadly, has a way of diffusing and showing up in other parts of the world.
South America is another interest of yours, right?

WF
Yes, but I've never been there. I sometimes paint pictures of places I haven't traveled to, and many of those have to do with misapprehension, armchair knowledge, and getting it wrong; a type of arrogance of the Westerner.
One obsession I had over the last couple of years was making many pictures of a female black panther who escaped from the Zürich Zoo in the 1930s. She had been put in a cage with a male, and the next day she was injured, so they suspected that the cats had gotten into some aggression with each other. So, they put her in a different cage, but she found a narrow vent, squeezed through it, and was gone. This was in October, and throughout the winter, they didn't know where she was. She is a tropical cat, and this was the snow-covered Alps in the dead of winter! Finally, at the end of December a farmer found her under a barn and shot her for food. It was during the Depression, and right before the Second World War. I made paintings that broke down the panther's first week, second week, third week, and so on. I tried to imagine what she was doing to survive. They didn't find dead livestock, but she was sighted everywhere in Europe: people in Spain saw her, in France; she was everywhere. She was in the newspapers and people came to the zoo just to look at the empty cage.

AR
Wow.

WF
I got this story from a zookeeper's manual called *Wild Animals in Captivity* by a guy called Heini Hediger. He was the zookeeper in Zürich after the war. This is the kind of story I'm looking for, right? More than likely, the tropical cat came from India, but it could also come from Africa. We don't know, and melanistic changes happen in jaguars as well. There's this whole cultural displacement narrative you could apply to the escaped cat. And then the sort of #MeToo aspect, where she's getting away from this abusive male. If you anthropomorphize this cat, the story becomes really rich. So I started painting her from all different points of view. I painted one where I imagined a child walking to school through a snowstorm, knowing the cat was out there somewhere. What would that vision be? Sometimes our programmed fear of wild things overwhelms us. In other instances I painted the cat from her own point of view. Because they never found a track, in many of the pictures I had her floating above the snow, making her into a magical spirit. And thinking of the farmer who cooked and ate her, I made pictures of campfires and had her climb the smoke to get out of this realm of human bullshit. She's leaving on the smoke. I'm interested in a sort of magical realism.

AR
You often dwell on our sad tendency to anthropomorphize animals. I'm wondering if you have a sliding scale of the most abused and the least abused animals.

WF

The point of the project, which is so engaging, is to shift the point of view. Just like you shift the camera angle in film and allow for different protagonists' perspectives. My idea is that this is a giant project that I'm working on, and that the point of view is sometimes the animal's, sometimes the anthropomorphizing human's, or sometimes a complete dream, a sort of hypnagogic message I got.

Robert Thurman, the Buddhist scholar, said to me that my ego had no participation in the work I was making, that this was an incarnation I was in, where the animals have stories that they need to tell and were telling them through me. He said that when he looks in the eyes of the animals that I painted, he knows that he's being communicated to in a way that had nothing to do with an artist's intention. And I just have to give over to this.

So I made quite a few paintings that were absolutely trying to honor what Thurman said. There's one of a gorilla brought over as an infant in the Graf Zeppelin from the Belgian Congo in 1929. This meant that her family was killed for sure because there's no real way to capture a baby gorilla without killing the mother and father. She ended up living many, many years in the United States. I painted a picture of her riding over in a first-class cabin on the zeppelin, and I wrote text that was trying to channel her. She says things like, "I no longer feel like biting. The people here have flat faces, the color of tongues." She's observing. "They offer food to me, much of it soft and sweet, and watch me while I eat it." Just these things that she's seeing, and she has this flat delivery of a traumatized child soldier. Like somebody who has been through so much at such a young age that she's just going along, like, I'm gonna live. I'm breathing. That's it. I'm not investing in this… But she does remember going through the forest with her mother. I was moved by this project—it was something that was given to me by Robert Thurman's POV instead of my own.

AR

Point of view is a very powerful way to look at the world.

WF

I know that you are also after the kind of history that I like: you are looking for the thing that people haven't noticed, the overlooked minutia that leads to some huge discovery. Susie, the Graf Zeppelin gorilla, lived to be about forty in the Cincinnati Zoo. That's it—a few sentences in some magazine article I read, you know? But I'm like, What does that mean? Jesus, what a journey! What was her life like? This is the beginning of a huge story for me.

The Graf Zeppelin, 2014, watercolor, gouache, and ink on paper, 41 × 59.75 inches.
Courtesy of the artist and and Kasmin Gallery. Photo by Elisabeth Bernstein.

Flucht, 2018, watercolor, gouache, and ink on paper, 60.5 × 83.5 inches.
Courtesy of the artist and Vito Schnabel. Photo by Tom Powel.

AR

It's amazing how we tend to compress and reduce an entire life to a single moment or episode and completely erase everything else. You have this universe that you're working in, and, I mean, it is endless—animals, plants, and humans, forever and ever, around the world. And you've laid out for us a couple of approaches to this. I'm curious if

you have a sense of whether there are other approaches you'll be discovering as you go along, or do you already see some of them? How has your own experience within this universe evolved over the years?

WF

Yeah, it's evolved a lot. Recently, I got interested in this regional thing. I had a show in St. Moritz, Switzerland, with my black panther paintings. While in the exhibit, you saw this black panther moving through the snowy Swiss mountains in my paintings. But when you looked out the gallery window, there were the Swiss mountains covered with snow. What was outside was inside. I did the same with the show in California—in my paintings are these lurid sunsets and then you look out the window, and there's a lurid sunset. And all the palm trees… There were even wildfires happening during the show. So that's a recent development for me to have my shows about a particular place scheduled in that particular place.

AR

Grounding everything in a particular place and set of people is usually a very good approach.

WF

I'm working with Max Hetzler and Gagosian, big galleries, and also museums. I'll do a show at the Morgan Library. I worked in the Musée de la Chasse et de la Nature in Paris, which is housed in a beautiful old building in the Marais. It's full of antique guns and paintings about the noble pursuit of hunting with hounds and horses, and the chase, this kind of thing. All tied to the aristocratic hunting tradition. So, I made a show subverting this—a hunt gone wrong.

In the eighteenth century, aristocrats tried to hunt for this animal that didn't even exist, it was called the Beast of Gévaudan. There were some wolf attacks in the mountains in the south of France. When the flocks would get attacked by wolves, some of the casualties were shepherdesses and it became sensationalized in the press. We're talking about right before the French Revolution. Somebody reported that a beast had been killing these young women, and there were prints of the victims with their breasts falling out of their blouses, being attacked by a monstrous black shaggy beast that was somewhere between a hyena and a wolf. It was enormous, like ten feet tall, in the drawings.

I decided that the beast was real, because the fear was real. The beast outlived the aristocrats and the peasants and everybody else in the story. My show included a sexy peasant girl, an aristocrat with a gun, and the Beast—and all their interactions. Things went badly for the hunter. At one point, the girl allies herself with the Beast; they both have green glowing eyes. And that's before the Revolution, you know. Like, she's gonna kill the aristocrat, too. At one point, the aristocrat is having sex with her while the beast is jumping out of the forest to get them both. The roles are shifting; the power is shifting. We hung my paintings in with the older artifacts, so they could communicate with each other, which was the point. This show worked really well and I decided I would do more of that kind of thing.

Woche Zehn, 2018, watercolor, gouache, and ink on paper, 22.75 × 30 inches.
Images courtesy of Vito Schnabel. Photos by Tom Powell.

Woche Drei, 2018, watercolor, gouache, and ink on paper, 22.75 × 30 inches.
Images courtesy of Vito Schnabel. Photos by Tom Powell.

Woche Eins, 2018, watercolor, gouache, and ink on paper, 22.75 × 30 inches.
Images courtesy of Vito Schnabel. Photos by Tom Powell.

AR
What about the pandemic we live in? I wonder if that will have any impact on your approach.

WF
I'm definitely getting a lot of work done in quarantine. (*laughter*) Generally, I don't like responding to current events as much as to history. History comments on current events in its own way. I do realize there's escapism in this for me. As a kid, I used to love to watch *King Kong* and get lost in the jungle and see Tyrannosauruses and other prehistoric animals. If I could get in a time machine, it wouldn't be to see the future but to see the past. The pandemic is too in my face right now. I don't have anything to say about it.

AR
Well, the kinds of questions that we ask from the past are guided by the stuff that is happening in the present. So my guess is that after the fires in California, the hurricanes in the Gulf of Mexico, and the epidemics everywhere, we will be especially keen on learning about the natural world, environmental history, the role of fires in the past, and so on. I mean, the past is so vast that we need to focus on something, and so even if you are not reacting to the present per se, you will be affected by the present in any case.

WF
You're right. I did a painting called *La Brea* (2016). And it shows the animals that were sunk in the La Brea Tar Pits in—

AR
Los Angeles.

WF

Yeah. I came up with a sort of horror movie scenario where they rise—their spirits covered with tar—and attack contemporary Los Angeles. Saber-toothed tigers, mammoths, and all of these animals, reappearing like a bad horror film. I painted a kind of epic painting, in a similar format as the Charles Knight reconstructions of ancient LA, with the animals getting trapped in the tar pits. My friend Rick Ridgeway, an environmentalist and mountaineer, saw an allegory in the painting about the futility of using fossil fuels. He was like, "They are made of tar, fossil fuel, rising out in revenge, to destroy the world." There's very strong evidence that this was the first mass extinction brought on by people, that this megafauna was flourishing in North America until humans arrived over the land bridge. As soon as people show up, you find skeletons with—

AR

Spears.

WF

Yes—spearpoints in them. So, we're pretty sure that our actions destroyed these animals. Rick called it my environmental *Guernica* (*laughter*). I just feel a sense of dread seeing tar seeping up from the ground. You feel the ground trembling. I've always felt uneasy in LA for this reason. So I can't strictly say that I don't respond to current events… There's a reason why I'm reading the things I'm reading. Like with your book—when you came across references to the enslavement of Native Americans rather than West Africans, you knew that this was a really important story to tell.

Studio view of *La Brea*, 2016, watercolor, gouache, and ink on paper, in three panels, total: 60.5 × 35.5 inches.
Courtesy of the artist and Gagosian Gallery. Photo by Christopher Burke.

AR
You're right. And yes, the megafauna of the Americas disappeared because of the actions of humans moving into this previously unpopulated continent and also because of climate change, another theme from the present that resonates strongly with us and guides what we want to know about the past. Are there artists from the past you particularly look up to in terms of storytelling?

WF
You know, the big moment for me as a student, when I realized I wanted to paint narrative pictures, was seeing Giotto's frescoes of the life of Saint Francis of Assisi.

AR
Now that you are a successful painter with lots of demands on your time, I wonder how you balance your need to work with the need to go back to the natural wellspring, so to speak, to keep the flame alive?

WF
I've structured my life in such a way that I spend as much time as I can in the studio. I don't say yes to very many things, and I sort of dropped out of most activities having to do with the art world. Of course, now there aren't any because of the pandemic. With me, it's like I stare at the picture for hours, then get up and paint for hours. Then stare at the picture for hours and then get up and paint for hours. Not the most interesting life. And very solitary.

As far as going into nature, I spent a couple of months in Maine this summer on an island. I'm very fortunate that, because I can sell my pictures, I have the means to leave and go somewhere beautiful for a while and just hike in the woods and swim and recharge. Where I was living this past summer, there are bald eagles everywhere, porpoises, seals, and huge schools of fish that make you think of the descriptions from the past when they talked about walking across the backs of the fish. This part of Maine is still like that.

I'm sixty years old and it feels good to just go to the studio. Delacroix said, If you're really going to be a savage in your studio, you have to have your meals served on time. He believed in a bourgeois existence for the artist, to give him the freedom to not be bourgeois in his head. It's important to remove the obstacles between me and the work, if possible. A long time ago I read an interview with Gabriel García Márquez, where he described his day. And I was so envious, because I was still a poor carpenter at the time, having to work full-time and having only the weekends to paint. He said, "I get up early in the morning, and everyone knows not to bother me until lunch. I write until one o'clock and when I come out my wife and friends are there and we all sit around the table and we eat and drink. Then we take a nap, and in the afternoon, I work a little more." Or you read about Nabokov living on the top floor of a hotel in Switzerland and having nothing in the way of the work, you know? Not having the minutiae of everyday life take over. Nabokov just put them on his wife, Vera. And with Márquez, it sounded like the same. Somebody's making lunch.

AR
Yeah, exactly.

WF
Artistic freedom has its costs. I always think I'm going to lose everything, and I'm like, Oh, shit, I'm too old to be a carpenter now. I don't know why, but I can default to anxiety so fast.

AR
I think it's aging. It's hard to imagine becoming something else at a certain point.

WF
You put all the chips on that one square. You don't have another game.

APOLLO
THE INTERNATIONAL ART MAGAZINE

'I find myself making growling noises while I'm painting'

An interview with Walton Ford

THOMAS MARKS
OCTOBER 24, 2018

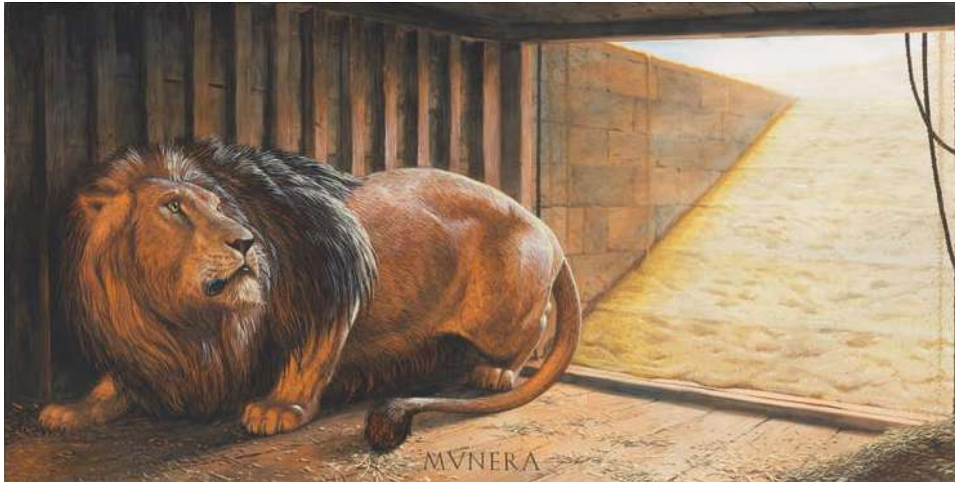
La Dernière Image (detail; 2018), Walton Ford. Courtesy the artist and Kasmin Gallery

The American artist is well known for his large-scale watercolours of birds and beasts. His current exhibition at Kasmin Gallery, New York, reimagines the life and times of the Barbary lion, which became extinct in the wild during the 20th century.

What first drew you to the Barbary lion?

I became aware of its existence quite a while ago, and I made some paintings that had this lioness as their subject. They've recently declassified the Barbary lion as a distinct sub-species of lion, which is more of biological than cultural interest – my interest in it is cultural. It was a lion that lived not in sub-Saharan but in North Africa, in the Atlas Mountains in what is now Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia. This was the lion that the Romans would have used in the Colosseum, and it later became the sort of go-to lion for zoos and menageries in Europe, because it was just across the Mediterranean.

Because of the colder climate than sub-Saharan Africa, it had a gigantic mane and a lot of black belly fur. It was a magnificent animal – the type of lion you see the most in art, in Rubens paintings, in Delacroix, in French Romantic sculptures… any time you see a lion in front of a library it's probably been patterned after one of these North African lions. The MGM lion was more than likely one of them.



Mvnera (2018), Walton Ford. Courtesy the artist and Kasmin Gallery

I'm interested in how wild animals, rather than domestic animals, become a part of human culture. We're almost like stalkers of a lion like this, the poor animal. We became obsessed with the fierceness, the ferocity, and the noble look of a lion to such a degree that this animal was driven to extinction in the wild. By the 1960s there were no more lions in North Africa.

In your previous paintings of lions, the animal has often looked tragic, vulnerable – as in *The Far Shores of Scholarship* [2003] or *The Royal Menagerie at the Tower of London – 3 December 1830* [2009]. But in some of the new paintings, the one that reimagines the Great Leipzig Lion Hunt, for example, the lion seems to be lording it over its human surroundings…

I've done more pathetic lions. I have a few different moods and modes in the show – and I wanted to move beyond clichés from popular culture, like the idea of the cowardly lion. In 1913 a circus was coming into Leipzig and the lions were being transported in a carriage – it was an old caravan style circus. It was a foggy night and the cage was hit by a streetcar, and eight lions escaped and were wondering around the streets of Leipzig in the fog.

In the popular press they would have imagined the lions attacking the horses, you know, and attacking people immediately, as if they're just programmed to destroy everything around then. But these were wild animals and when they got loose they were probably wandering around just trying to figure out what to do, where to go or how to be safe. They're not usually in a mode of man-eating.

The bowler hat on the ground is surreal – like something left over from Magritte.

I found a contemporary image of the escape, a painting that showed the lions bursting forth from the cage, with men running for their lives and their bowler hats flying off to accentuate the drama. But I wanted a decidedly undramatic moment, to show the curiosity and timid confusion of these lost lionesses, which don't know where to go or what to

do, and don't know what they're seeing. I imagined one of the hats that had been left behind: the lions approach it like a strange object, like a turtle or something.

Leipzig 20 Oktober 1913 (2018), Walton Ford. Courtesy the artist and Kasmin Gallery

Is the cityscape in that painting a change of direction for you?

Absolutely. For this show I decided to do proper exhibition watercolours. In the past my largest source of inspiration has been more taxonomic natural history imagery, where you have a specimen against a white sheet of paper – you might have a low horizon background but generally you're trying to show the animal off to best advantage in either a profile or a sort of three-quarters view, as a more-or-less scientific illustration. For this show I was more interested in a painterly mode, and getting into these spaces and these environments.

Another work, *Un Homme qui Rêve*, imagines Eugène Delacroix devoured by a lion. How far have you been consumed by your subject?

You do go into character, in a way, when you do these. Because they're narrative pictures, you really live inside them while you're making them. I find myself making growling noises while I'm painting.

I was thinking about how Delacroix went to North Africa when he was a young man, in his 30s, and then for the rest of his life painted Arab subjects in his studio in Paris based on his sketch books from that time. I wanted to imagine Delacroix devoured by his subject matter – and by all the clichés of orientalism, too.

Bill Buford has previously suggested that in your work you project yourself into a world that didn't yet have a camera. Does that hold true for these paintings?

I'm no longer consumed with the idea of pre-photography. The final painting I worked on is about the last photograph of a North African lion in the wild, taken by a guy called Marcelin Flandrin, who was a photographer in Casablanca and became one of the pioneers of aerial photography. He was in a plane going from Casablanca to Dakar, and saw a lion walking in a canyon down below him, and he took a photograph of it, which he sold as one of his postcards. The last painting for the show has the bi-plane passing over this Barbary lion, and all of Flandrin's exotic, orientalist postcards are fluttering down from the aeroplane, including the photo of the last Barbary lion. It's an impossible scene but it makes a lot of sense to me.

Un Homme qui Rêve (2018), Walton Ford. Courtesy the artist and Kasmin Gallery

The thing is, the lion doesn't give a fuck about whether he's a star, or whether he's the MGM lion, or whether he's this human symbol of nobility, he's just driven from his homeland, being killed and being imprisoned and driven to extinction… There's nothing in it for the lion being a superstar of human culture.

Do you see your art as a type of conservationism?

I don't like to riff from the headlines. I'm really interested in history: I paint in a sort of 19th-century style so I find myself painting about the 19th and early 20th century a lot. I don't want to do a painting of a turtle with a fishing net on it – I can't change anybody's mind by making paintings that talk about contemporary concerns.

It's unusual to use watercolour on this scale – and few contemporary painters use it at all. Is it an anachronistic medium?

I was going to use that word. I think there's an enormous amount of resonance with this medium when it comes to my subject matter: it's the traditional way to portray an animal from the moment, when you're in the presence of it. The first real natural history painting is the wild hare that Dürer painted in 1502 – and it's painted in the exact same way that I'm painting my paintings, except that it's better.

There's something visceral and wonderful about an animal that's painted life size, that's sort of in the room with you – as in Audubon's watercolours. Animals never look the way we expect them to – when we go to the zoo we're like, holy shit, look at the size of that thing, or look at how weird it is, or how it moves. The actual scale of an animal is always a bit of a surprise. I want to capture that: if I paint an elephant or a lion, I want to put it in the room with you and fill your field of vision with it. I want to make paintings that defy the photographic ability to reproduce them. I was recently in Venice and saw the big Tintoretto Crucifixion, in which all the figures are slightly larger than life. The only way to see them is in person: you can't really have an opinion about Tintoretto unless you've been to Venice.

Audubon kept specimens of birds that he pinned into poses before painting them. Do you have a natural history collection?

Not really. There's a mixture between a 19th-century studio and a very 21st-century approach. I have animal skulls: a few feline skulls, a few canine skulls, and a domestic cat skeleton, which is helpful for all of this, as well as some 19th-century death masks from Paris – there's one of a big cat and one of a bear. I have plasters from the great animal sculptor, Bayre, who was really good on anatomy, and some pretty detailed little models of big cats by a contemporary Japanese maker. And I have a large collection of plastic animals.

What about taxidermy?

The Museum of Natural History here in New York City has some of the finest taxidermy that was ever executed. The people who worked there were sculptors of the highest calibre, and they would basically make a beautiful sculpture of an animal that was anatomically precise, and then work the skin over that. They're not stuffed in the style of upholstery, they're properly mounted in gorgeous poses. I go to the museum and sit and do drawings, or to the zoo and take photographs. And then I sit in front of the computer and do Google image searches like crazy, but only after I have plenty of three-dimensional information. I never take a photographic image and paint it: I always create my own poses from a rough sketch and then try to find material that can help me make that.

For something like fur detail – the way that fur grows on the face of a lion is quite complex – I go to the Museum of Natural History and stand in front of the diorama and draw it, then keep that drawing in my files. Photos never really show fur properly – they blur it out for whatever reason.

Do you have any pets?

As a child I had masses of pets – lots of wild animals that I caught. I grew up in the Hudson Valley, and as a teenager one year I worked on a road crew that was clearing bush for the water department along the road. I used to bring a pillowcase to work to catch something called a pilot black snake – a huge constrictor – and I brought one home and kept in my closet for the summer. I fed it rats, and then let it go in the fall.

My mom never knew what I was going to bring home. I raised a few wild birds: the birds that I brought home flew in and out of my room for an entire season, before I took them back to where I found them and let them go. There were always animals around, but right now I don't have any – the responsibility is too much.

The New York Review of Books

Walton Ford: Twenty-First-Century Naturalist

Walton Ford is never interested merely in the natural world, but in the way humans have documented, exploited, and repurposed it, and how these species have been mythologized, even as most of them have disappeared from the wild. Ford makes paintings of paintings of animals.

LUCY JAKUB
DECEMBER 16, 2018

Walton Ford, *La Dernière Image*, 2018. Walton Ford / Kasmin Gallery.

Looking at the paintings of Walton Ford in a book, you might mistake them for the watercolors of a nineteenth century naturalist: they are annotated in longhand script, and yellowed at the edges as if stained by time and voyage. Something's always outrageously off, though: the gorilla is holding a human skull; a couple of parrots are mating on the shaft of an elephant's penis. In his early riffs on Audubon prints, Ford painted birds mid-slaughter: his American Flamingo (1992) flails head over heels after being shot with a rifle, and an eagle with its foot in a trap billows smoke from its beak (Audubon, in search of a painless method of execution, tried unsuccessfully to asphyxiate an eagle with sulfurous gas).

Ford is never interested merely in the natural world, but in the way humans have documented, exploited, and repurposed it, and how these species have been mythologized, even as most of them have disappeared from the wild. Walton Ford makes paintings of paintings of animals.

Since the 1990s, Ford has been retrospectively caught up in the nineteenth century's obsession with nature, back when the mountains were crawling with lions, and the sky was full of birds. I, too, love the artifacts of that obsession, the attempted anatomical precision, the charmingly weird field notes. The vicarious thrill of imagining seeing a species for the first time. Yet it's impossible to look at such images today without also seeing their cost: the greedy

appropriation of exotic species and cultures, the rush for profit, and the careless underestimation of our ability to annihilate entire populations of creatures we claim to revere. These contradictions are not lost on Ford. He has mastered the lush aesthetic and technique of his predecessors (though he works from taxidermy at the American Museum of Natural History and photos on the Internet) but puts the absurdity and folly—and the sex and the violence—back into an otherwise sanitized genre.

Walton Ford, *Nila*, 1999-2000. Walton Ford / Kasmin Gallery.

His new series “Barbary,” on display at Kasmin’s new gallery in Chelsea, is a study of the Barbary lion. Once native to the Atlas Mountains in North Africa, it now exists only in captivity, and its name was recently scrubbed from the taxonomic record, revised to the classification of subspecies in 2017. Though genetically similar to its cousins on the savannah and in Asia, the Barbary lion is distinguished by its large mane and solitary habits, adapted to its cold and barren home in the mountains (Ford likes to refer to the “cultures” of different populations). It was the lion known to the Roman, British, and French empires, and the one that MGM took as its dynamic logo—the king of beasts, which for all of Western civilization has embodied strength, courage, and nobility. But it’s a doubtful honor; as Ford has put it, “when humans become stalker/lovers of a certain animal, that animal is screwed.”

Each painting in the series is based on an encounter, historical or imagined, between lions and people. Continuing a long preoccupation of Ford’s, these often have an overt anti-colonialist and anti-imperialist edge that is poignantly mirrored in the dynamic between humans and their animal conquests. Ford punctures Jean-Léon Gérôme’s sensational depictions of the Venatio in the Circus Maximus with *MVNERA*, which shows a lion cowering in the elevator shaft that brought animals into the arena. Eugène Delacroix, another artist whose paintings brought an Orientalist fascination to the cultures and wildlife of Northern Africa, gets his due as well.

In “Barbary” Ford plays with light and atmosphere, no longer trying to create the illusion of an archived image; the watercolors are more like the frescoes he studied as an art student in Rome, and are some of his most realistic and immersive images yet. In the cavernous gallery, the five foregrounded lions are luminous and larger than life-size—suddenly, you realize you’re surrounded. In these scenes, Ford has stepped out of the perspective of the mythologizing human and into the experience of the lion, trying to think as an animal that’s been threatened,

captured, or brought to an unfamiliar environment might. Deliberately, the demeanors of his lions—anxious, contemplative, wary, curious—are antipodes of the qualities we associate with large predators.

This empathy isn't unprecedented in his previous work, though it has rarely cut through the irony so clearly. Many of Ford's paintings are concerned with extinction; one of his most arresting images, Falling Bough (2002), is not of an individual animal but of a swarm of passenger pigeons on a log, falling from the sky. But local extinction is also on his mind, expressed in several gigantic paintings of the grizzly bear, which is extinct in California. In "Barbary," he tells the story of wild animals that throughout history have been repeatedly thrust into human environments as spectacles, made into a trademark of our culture, until it's the only place they exist.

In the most captivating portrait in the series, *Leipzig 20 Oktober 1913*, three lionesses approach a bowler hat lying on the cobblestones of a misty, lamplit street. It's a piece of history that could be a children's book: a Barnum truck carrying eight circus lions was hit by a trolley in Leipzig, and the lions escaped into the night. Contemporary illustrations of the "Leipzig lion hunt" showed lions lunging ferociously at pedestrians and police, an exaggeration Ford finds ridiculous. He instead imagines a tranquil moment while the lions, disoriented but curious, could explore the city obscured by thick fog. Within four hours police had shot and killed six of them, and were photographed with the corpses as though they were hunters with trophies. Only two lions, which strolled into a hotel, survived their brief encounter with freedom.

Walton Ford, *Augury*, 2018. Walton Ford / Kasmin Gallery.

Some of the lions in "Barbary" still stand for larger forces. With *Augury*, Ford revisits one of his earlier paintings, The Royal Menagerie at the Tower of London (2009). In 1830, a lion held in the Tower was mauled by two Bengal tigers when a zookeeper left the door adjoining their cells open. The symbolism of the event, which was followed twenty-seven years later by the Indian uprising against the British East India Company in Meerut, is the sort of historical rhyme that Ford finds irresistible. But in the new version, he has frozen the moment that the lion, midlunch, realizes its cage has been infiltrated. The tigers peer through the hatch, teeth gleaming—two predators that never would have met in the wild.

History is a bloodbath, but sometimes there's catharsis in Ford's retellings. His characteristic irreverence comes through in *Un Homme qui Rêve*. A magnificent male lion, its maw crimson, stands contemplatively over the scattered effects of a traveler, splayed notebooks and a box of paints. The title is taken from a line in Delacroix's travel diary, "Un homme qui rêve et qui voit des choses qu'il craint de voir lui échapper," expressing his anxiety that all he

had seen during his brief trip to Morocco in 1832 would fade from his mind—an anxiety that drove him to fill notebooks with sketches that he would later paint in Paris, including Lion Hunt (1860–1861) and many other studies of the Barbary lion. In Ford's fantasy, the lions get the last word. In the sunset, the lionesses are just visible, finishing off their kill. Perhaps it's only a coincidence that "Barbary" is in New York just as Delacroix has his landmark retrospective at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, but it's an irony Ford must enjoy.

Art in America

Walton Ford

MAY 22, 2014

Walton Ford

at Paul Kasmin,
through Jun. 21
293 Tenth Ave.

Big (up to 10 feet on a side), bright and meticulously rendered, these recent watercolors add a new twist to Ford's longstanding, well-researched concern with human categorizations of nature. Not only do we encounter an albumlike rendering of an ancient mythical serpent inhaling multitudinous birds, we also get to see Susie, the first female gorilla brought to the U.S., ensconced in a zeppelin cabin during her 1929 flight. Nearby is Happy Jerry, a port-drinking, clay-pipe-smoking mandrill who once lunched at Windsor Castle with King George IV. For the first time, Ford offers us the internal reflections of several of his creatures in wry marginal notations. Inter-species assessment, it seems, is a two-way street.

VOGUE

Walton Ford Is the Wes Anderson of the Art World: His New Show Opens at Paul Kasmin Gallery

Paul Kasmin Gallery presents "Watercolors," a new show by Walton Ford that is a return to form for the naturalist-inspired painter

MARK GUIDUCCI
MAY 7, 2014

Photo: Courtesy of Paul Kasmin Gallery

A Walton Ford painting can be like your favorite Wes Anderson film. Both are predicated on stylized nostalgia. Both are set in fantastical worlds that are at once wholly fabricated and yet entirely familiar. And both are also punctuated with the rare, shocking moment—usually in the form of violence or vulgarity—that can alternatively snap the viewer back to reality or take us further down the rabbit hole.

Ford's latest show, "Watercolors," which opened last week at Paul Kasmin's Tenth Avenue gallery, is no exception. There, the 54-year-old artist presents seven new monumental canvases that each center on an individual member of the animal kingdom, either historical or mythological, in large-scale drama.

Of the historical variety, there's Susie: the first female gorilla to visit the United States, riding high in a first class cabin of *The Graf Zeppelin,* which represents a transatlantic journey that actually took place in 1929. Next to her is a baboon called "Happy Jerry," recounted in Adam White's 1870 publication *Heads and Tales* as the first (and likely only) baboon to ever dine with King George IV, smoke a clay pipe, and sample the best selection of port in the royal residence, as the title *Windsor, May 1829* suggests. In each picture, marginalia on the edge of the painting is written

from the primate's point of view.

Of the pictures with folkloric inspiration, *The Tigress* is perhaps the work of most staggering grandeur (it's also rumored to be owned by Leonardo DiCaprio). At a full five-by-ten feet, it depicts a medieval anecdote about a fleeing poacher who distracts a mother tiger robbed of her cub by dropping reflective glass orbs in his wake. In Ford's watercolor, those balls surround the poor animal like ominous bubbles, theatrically conveying her sense of hopeless frustration. Another painting, derived from a chapter of Aelian's *De Natura Animalium,* describes a 60-foot snake that resides in the Phrygian countryside and mystically lures a ceaseless stream of prey into its mouth like a tractor beam. Ford cites *Rhyndacus,* as the serpent is called, as an allegory for the painter's own addictive personality (he is two years sober).

The show, on the whole, is a return to form for Ford. His last exhibition with Kasmin, which struck out from his naturalist style—one that has evoked endless comparisons to John James Audubon and drew upon *King Kong* in both subject matter (enormous, cropped in portraits of cartoon-like gorillas) and title, which quoted a line from the original 1933 film: "I don't like to look at him, Jack. It makes me think of that awful day on the island." Even calling this show "Watercolors" feels like Ford's rededication to his longtime medium and perhaps also his artistic self after the past three years have seen him go through divorce and a return to sobriety.

Which is perhaps why the opening party for Ford's show last week felt like a homecoming. Paul Kasmin was abuzz with old friends, loyal collectors, the occasional familiar face (Marcus Wainwright), and even Ford's own mother. That a celebration for so many fantasized watercolor beasts would continue late-night amidst the taxidermy of the Jane Hotel was only fitting.

W

Go Ape

Artist Walton Ford discusses his new solo exhibition.

FAN ZHONG
APRIL 30, 2014

Windsor, May 1829, 2014, by Walton Ford. Courtesy of the artist and Paul Kasmin Gallery.

Susie, a gorilla with a lustrous black coat, is crossing the Atlantic en route to New York. It's 1929, so she is traveling by zeppelin. In a well-publicized spectacle, she will be the first female gorilla ever to set paw on U.S. soil—and she looks bewildered, or lost, or maybe simply resigned to a long life of entertaining strangers. This is the scene in one of Walton Ford's latest watercolor paintings, *The Graf Zeppelin (2014),* which will be on view in the artist's solo exhibition opening at New York's Paul Kasmin Gallery on May 1.

Ford's depiction of the plight (and flight) of Susie is not only notable for its incredible backstory and adept rendering of a gorilla's inner life, but for the painting's stillness. From Ford, a realist painter of wildlife who borrows from natural history illustrators like James Audubon, we expect vicious wolves and killer birds and scaly crocodiles, choking and biting and beheading one another. "My traditional mode of working is with action-packed narratives," Ford, 54, admits. "But my last show got me interested in doing portraits."

That would be a 2011 exhibition, also at Paul Kasmin, of enormous—i.e., "life" size—portraits of King Kong's head in various states of fury and disappointment. "I wanted to expand on this idea of a good, simple portrait," Ford says. "Animal activists anthropomorphize them in a way that allows you to understand their suffering. What I do is subtler. Susie, for example, is more numb than anything else—the kind of numbness that comes from too much sudden change."

About a year and a half ago, Ford's friend Robert Thurman—father of Uma, founder of Tibet House and very public Buddhist—suggested to Ford that the artist must have been reincarnated so that he could act as a medium for the animal kingdom. "I thought it was crazy nonsense—at first," Ford says. "But then I thought, What if I just went ahead and acted as if that were actually the case? The idea is still absurd, and insanely hubristic. But it gave me the permission to make these paintings."

Ford sells his paintings for millions of dollars to celebrity collectors like Daphne Guinness, Tom Ford, and Leonardo DiCaprio, but he has a prickly sense of humor about his status in the art world. "I don't care about fine art," he says, laughing. In fact, he has taken a half step further away by handwriting interior dialogue from the animals' point of view directly onto several of the new paintings. The words can be artfully abstruse, but the format is not unlike that of a graphic novel (a medium he is planning to explore). "I was definitely inside the head of those animals," Ford says. When he was making a painting of a mandrill named Happy Jerry who was brought from London to Windsor Palace in order to entertain King George IV, Ford recreated the day in his head: "So it's six hours back and forth from London to Windsor; he would've had lunch with the king. Obviously, he wouldn't stay overnight there. He would've gotten up early. They would've put a leather strap around his middle. How would you transport a mandrill? What would the ride feel like?" It sounds as though he is just getting going, but Ford cuts himself off. "I just thought if I could work through the process myself, then I might have actual insight into the mandrill," he explains. "Otherwise, it's just bullshit."

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

WILD THING

Walton Ford has become famous for monumental wildlife paintings that bring a primal kingdom indoors. As the artist embarks on the next chapeter of his life, his latest works reveal a new thoughtfulness–though nothing will tame his savage beasts.

CLAIRE HOWORTH
APRIL 29, 2014

WILD THING

Walton Ford has become famous for monumental wildlife paintings that bring a primal kingdom indoors. As the artist embarks on the next chapter of his life, his latest works reveal a new thoughtfulness—though nothing will tame his savage beasts.

BY CLAIRE HOWORTH PHOTOGRAPHY BY LEONORA HAMILL

SNAKES AND LADDERS Ford in his TriBeCa studio, at work on *Rhyndacus*, one of several new large-scale watercolors on show this month at Paul Kasmin Gallery.

UP ONE WALL of Walton Ford's messy Manhattan studio stretches nine or so feet of a fantastical snake, his thick tail coiling along the banks of an Anatolian river, his jaw unhinged as a flock of delicate Turkish birds flutter down his gullet. *Rhyndacus*, the title of the nearly 10-by-5-foot painting, is inspired by an ancient Roman account of real and fabled creatures, *On the Nature of Animals*, and is one of several new works that Ford will present at a solo show at Paul Kasmin Gallery this month. The massive painting is remarkable not only for its scale and spectacle, but for what it reveals about Ford's life these past couple of years.

"I can't have enough. It's never enough. I swallow it all. Everything that's beautiful in my life is going down my throat," says Ford.

The serpent, the 54-year-old artist explains, reflects his struggles with addiction and his newfound sobriety—a state in contrast to the realm of his work over the past two decades. Part of the charisma of Ford's watercolors, which many compare to the illustrations of famed naturalist John James Audubon for their meticulous realism, is that unlike Audubon's, they are often debauched and violent. His beasts copulate, feast and kill. Each sprawling piece is based on text—a passage from George Orwell, an arcane field guide—and conceptualized through classical wildlife drawings. Ford's images are allegories of colonialism, conservation, or human nature, though humans rarely appear. The work, which commands up to $1 million per canvas, is both accessible and compelling, and Ford has found fans beyond the art world: The Rolling Stones commissioned him to create a logo for their 50th anniversary, and Leonardo DiCaprio and Daphne Guinness collect his work, which is also in the permanent collections of the Smithsonian American Art Museum, the Whitney Museum of American Art and the Museum of Modern Art.

Before Ford got sober two years ago, he says, "I just was blowing stuff up. You can't really sustain relationships if you're acting like that. It was time to straighten up. You've had enough at some point. Thirty years of being a maniac." In short and chaotic order, he split from his wife of 23 years, the artist Julie Jones, with whom he has two daughters, and quickly married a book editor. Though that marriage ended within 10 months, it brought him back to New York City from rural Massachusetts, where he had lived since 1996.

"It finally felt like I'd had enough of the Berkshires. It never felt like home up there," he says, rubbing his chin. Ford has an impish face, and physical brawn courtesy of his artwork—the pieces, at a huge scale that's rare for watercolors, can take months to complete, and Ford often paints with his arm held high in the air for hours. His TriBeCa studio has double-height ceilings to accommodate the works.

Back in the city, he's removed from nature—"the worst part"—but everything else feels steadier. Ford doesn't flinch from talking about his proclivities, or how it runs in his family.

His parents both came from old Southern families (Ford says he's related to the plantation owners of the same name as those in *12 Years a Slave*), artsy types who fled north to Larchmont, NY. "Heretics," Ford calls them. "I was lucky. I grew up in Westchester County with these Southern parents. The food was good—I had all the eccentricity and none of the repression."

"My dad was a wild, alcoholic, womanizing, brawling guy," Ford continues. "But for that generation, if you were funny enough, creative enough, interesting enough, it didn't matter." (His parents did divorce when Ford was 11.) The boozing was one part of the culture that shaped young Walton: Enfield Berry "Flicky" Ford, who died in 2003, was a Don Draper type, a Time Inc. creative executive whose crowd included cartoonists, comic book illustrators and artists.

For all of his flaws, Father Ford instilled the love of nature that fuels both of his sons—Walton's older brother, Flick, is an angler and naturalist artist. (Ford also has two sisters, Ashley and Emily.) In the summers, they portaged to a remote Canadian lake house. "It had no electricity, just Coleman lamps, a wood-burning stove. You had the whole lake to yourself. That was my dad's idea of heaven."

In art, though, Flick, six years Walton's senior, was his "first teacher," he says. The two would spend hours drawing critters in their shared bedroom. "It was always animals," says Ford of his artwork. His mother, who now lives on Cape Cod, recently sent Walton a package filled with his childhood efforts: colorful boa constrictors; sweet Beatrix Potter-esque rabbits; a narrative tableau featuring the family cat.

It was with his mother's encouragement that he attended a summer session at the Rhode Island School of Design, which led to his college education there. But after graduating in 1982 and moving to Brooklyn, he struggled to find his stride. Over the next decade, Ford made ends meet with carpentry work, painting landscapes in oil when he could—nothing that got him much buzz in an era that was all about neo-expressionists like Julian Schnabel.

When Jones, whom he had met at RISD and married after graduation, won a Fulbright for a six-month stint in India in 1994, Ford went along. He found that he took a liking to the local birds, which inspired the metaphorical wildlife watercolors that would become his focus.

"I remember when I first went to his studio," says Kasmin, who has been his dealer since 1996. "I could tell he was hugely ambitious but not doing what he wanted. He knew how good he was at the watercolors,

ANIMAL HOUSE
The "flotsam and jetsam" of Ford's intense research fills a corner of his studio; Ford's library displays a fully functional .22 rifle sculpture, by Ford's friend, artist Tom Sachs, alongside vintage plaster death masks of animals

and nobody had ever told him to do them large."

"His pictures are so subversive and yet so beautiful," says Guinness, whose art collection includes *Chaumière de Dolmancé*, an unsettling depiction of a captive monkey. "They've got an enormous amount of humor, and they are saying something, whether it's political or emotional or historical. The more I know Walton, the more fascinated I am."

In this latest show, two of the other new works are portraits of primates, the mammal Ford identifies with the most. ("I have a serious Curious George problem," he says.) One is Susie, a gorilla who was displayed at the Cincinnati Zoo in the early 20th century. The other is a mandrill named Happy Jerry, an object of amusement for King George IV, that "gouty playboy," as Ford calls him. Ford has yet to decide if he'll give Happy Jerry genitalia—many of his male animals are depicted showing off outsize sexual anatomy. "It's nice to have a penis," he says. "I think I'll probably do it because I can never resist."

A departure for Ford lies at the bottom of these portraits, where there are short, childlike narratives from the primates' points of view. *"I was taken from my stone room very early this morning. I made them chase me a bit at first but finally I let them put the tight strap around my middle. They led me out on a chain past the other rooms,"* reads the text below Happy Jerry, who is depicted smoking a clay pipe, as he did in real life, on a chair at Windsor Castle.

Ford says his sobriety has made him "weirdly more compassionate," and these texts explore what his friend Robert Thurman, professor of Buddhist studies at Columbia University, recently told him: that Ford is a medium for his animal subjects.

"Walton is not painting so everybody will be a vegetarian—he's trying to wake people up. And he's a vehicle for that in his paintings. That's why they have such a power," says Thurman.

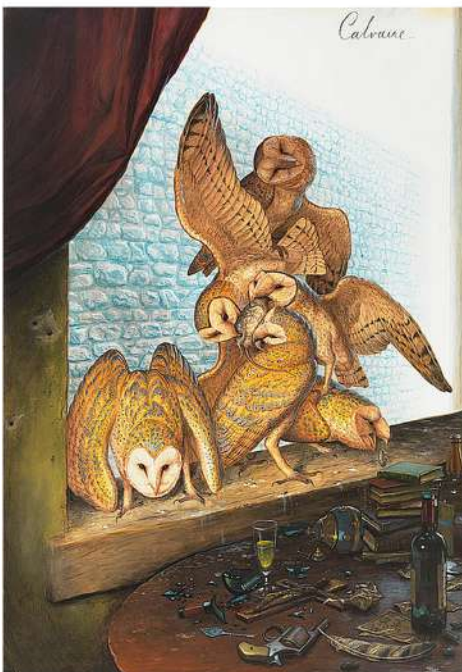
Ford doesn't attach a specific spirituality to his work, but he has begun to spread his compassion beyond the studio. He has contributed works to benefit the Natural Resources Defense Council and last year's 11th Hour auction at Christie's that raised $38 million for the Leonardo DiCaprio Foundation, which is dedicated to ecological preservation. Ford plans to team up with the New York hotelier Eric Goode on turtle rescue; he thinks the reptiles "are cool, and not charismatic enough to get a lot of attention."

"Walton is working through this inventory of ideas," says Kasmin. "His paintings are surprisingly related to what goes on in his life. So you've had very black periods, you've had very lively periods."

His newest ideas include a graphic novel, based on the memoir of an animal handler in 1920s Manhattan. Ford is also working on *Visions of Paleo Art: 1830-1980*, an anthology of 19th- and 20th-century depictions of prehistoric life written by his girlfriend, 24-year-old art journalist Zoë Lescaze, to be published by Taschen.

All of these projects seem necessary to occupy his frenetically creative mind. "When you are one of us," meaning addicts, "you wake up with some pretty crazy shit in your head every day. Things like meditation or prayer are sophisticated psychological tools to keep you alive rather than dead. I don't want to end up like Jackson Pollock or Philip Seymour Hoffman." says Ford. And his art has reaped the benefits of his new way of life. "I see all kinds of helpful lessons that I never did. This is a good place to be." •

La Fontaine, a 2006 work, which sold for nearly $750,000 at auction; a 2012 work titled *Calvaire*.



"IT WAS TIME TO STRAIGHTEN UP. YOU'VE HAD ENOUGH AT SOME POINT. THIRTY YEARS OF BEING A MANIAC."

—WALTON FORD

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ARTFORUM

Walton Ford

DAVID FRANKEL
FEBRUARY 2012

Walton Ford, *On the Island*, 2011, watercolor, gouache, ink, and pencil on paper mounted on aluminum panel, 9 x 12'.

Walton Ford made his name in the late 1980s and early '90s with work that had a political and ecological agenda. From early, folk-art-like paintings of nineteenth-century contacts between white settlers and Native Americans to the work for which he's best known—large-scale, finely detailed watercolors of animals, derived in style from the prints of the ornithologist John James Audubon and similar naturalist art—Ford found ways to suggest realities hidden by his visual sources. Much as postcolonial scholars have read the novels of Jane Austen, for example, against the slave-trade economy of her time, Ford studied the historical and intellectual context of the seductive art forms he had mastered—not to mention the specific, disturbing behavior of Audubon in particular—to produce pictures that combined the appeal of his models with pointers toward circumstances that they depended on but obscured. A ruling idea in his work was humans' inhumane treatment of the nonhuman, a rather simple message that his wide-ranging research and appetite for information allowed him to play through a rich series of variations.

Ford's recent show included a six-piece narrative group in his familiar style, but its centerpiece was a departure, a trio of works about King Kong, the special-effects hero of Merian Cooper and Ernest Schoedsack's much-loved giant-ape movie of 1933. Kong is Ford's first film star. Painted and drawn on paper sheets mounted on aluminum, the pictures show only his head and shoulders, but since Ford likes to work life-size, matching the scale of the image to the animal depicted, these works are nine feet high—the largest single-panel paintings the artist has made. Other shifts include forsaking his usually crystalline color for the dusty black/gray palette of Kong's skin and fur, and a rendering more cartoony than painstakingly empirical—or perhaps Ford is now painstakingly empirical in dealing with a cartoony subject. Something else that seemed new was an installation suggesting that the works were designed for the space they were to be shown in: Each neatly occupied one wall of a square room, so that, standing in the center, you felt surrounded by Kong, whose face looked down at you equidistantly from all directions within view. The associations between Ford's triptychlike installation and the altarpiece, with its wings to either side of a central panel, added a sacrificial undertow to this experiential glut of gorillaness. In the images to either side, Kong looked first bewildered, or perhaps appalled, then deeply injured; in the central image he was simply gloriously angry. To the extent that the presentation echoed the altarpiece structure, rhyming Kong with Christ and his fate with the Crucifixion, each character's tragedy fed a reading of the other's, to both mutually reinforcing and cleverly contradictory effect—Christ isn't meant to be an angry god, and even if he were, it's hard to imagine him as angry as Kong.

When Ford was younger and less established, his politics and his position seemed in tune. The fact that his work now sells for very large sums is an endorsement that at the same time raises questions. The value of Ford's pictures, the thing that separates them from the substantial quantity of well-drawn art in the Audubon mold, surely has to do with the degree to which they're analytic, with how insistently, or whether, they ask us to rethink our relation to the natural world. But does their market stature suggest a public that's obliviously comfortable looking at them? Or, not necessarily much better, a public that relishes them as the superattractive form of a message otherwise painful to think about? Ford sometimes seems to push against such issues; in the six works accompanying the Kong paintings, for example, a sexually aroused monkey violently murders a gorgeous parrot—a tough set of images to look at, let alone to hang on your wall. It is not Ford's responsibility, in any case, to repair the world—or rather, it's his to no greater extent than it is yours and mine.

—*David Frankel*

THE NEW YORKER

Man and Beast

The narrative art of Walton Ford

CALVIN THOMAS
JANUARY 26, 2009

PROFILES

MAN AND BEAST

The narrative art of Walton Ford.

BY CALVIN TOMKINS

The Tasmanian wolf, also known as the Tasmanian tiger, was neither a wolf nor a tiger. It was a thylacine, a marsupial cousin to kangaroos and wallabies, which evolved over several million years, in the forests of Australia and New Guinea, into a fearsome apex predator. Long extinct on the mainland, carnivorous thylacines survived on the island of Tasmania into the early years of the twentieth century, when the settlers finished them off. Their violent extinction is the central drama of Walton Ford's latest painting, a huge and surpassingly weird watercolor whose early stages I observed during several visits last fall to his ramshackle, barnlike studio in Great Barrington, Massachusetts.

"This animal scared the hell out of the settlers," Ford said, exuberantly. "It looked like a wolf, but with stripes, like a tiger, and they could get up on their hind legs, which made them even scarier. The settlers were sheepherders, and they built up this myth of a huge, bipedal, nocturnal vampire-beast that sucked the blood of sheep. The settlers put a bounty on these animals and began killing them off in every possible way—poison, traps, snares, guns. The last known one died in captivity in the nineteen-thirties, but they lived on in people's imagination."

Ford's painting, which was spread across three large sheets of paper pinned to the wall, showed a roiling pyramid of murderous animals, lightly blocked out in washes of yellow ochre and raw umber. A few of the thylacines had lambs or parts of lambs in their jaws, but others seemed to be biting and tearing viciously at one another. "My idea," he said, "was to make an island out of thylacines and killed sheep—they're not on an island; they *are* the island—and to have it sinking beneath the waves. I want it to be a brutal picture of thylacine bloodlust, a blame-the-victim picture, a sort of fever dream of the Tasmanian settler alone in the bush with these animals, although there was never any evidence of one killing a human being, and very little evidence of their eating sheep."

The way he described it, the whole thing sounded hilarious. Ford, who is forty-eight years old and powerfully built, with a shaved head and a rapid-fire, nonstop way of talking, overwhelms you with his enthusiasm for what he does. And you have to agree that he does it very well. As a realist painter of birds, quadrupeds, reptiles, and other species, Ford has any

number of peers in the field of natural-history illustration but very few in the world of contemporary art. His technical facility is dazzling. Working almost exclusively in watercolor, he can render feathers, fur, hide, trees, plants, weather, landscape, and other natural elements with virtuosic skill. No one else, to my knowledge, has ever done watercolors of this size and ambition—the thylacine painting measures eleven and a half feet long by eight feet high—and no contemporary artist has employed natural history to tell the kind of stories that Ford tells. Although human beings appear only marginally in his work, if at all, most of his paintings have to do with the deep interaction between man and animal. "I do a huge amount of research on animals," he told me at one point. "But it's the person that gives me a way in. Animals in the wild are boring. Before Fay Wray comes to Skull Island, King Kong isn't doing anything. There's no story until she shows up. . . . What I'm doing, I think, is a sort of cultural history of the way animals live in the human imagination."

There were six large paintings in Ford's most recent New York show, at the Paul Kasmin Gallery, in Chelsea, last spring, and each one told a tale. In the past, Ford sometimes wrote excerpts from his research right on the painting, in spidery handwriting that mimicked the field notes of John James Audubon and the other nineteenth-century natural-history artists he admires, but he has more or less stopped doing this. Now he prefers to let the image stand on its own and project its mysterious aura. His three-panel "Loss of the Lisbon Rhinoceros," the most arresting image in the 2008 show, is based on an incident in the year 1515, when a ship carrying a captive Indian rhino as a gift from King Manuel, of Portugal, to Pope Leo X, in Rome, foundered in a storm off the coast of Genoa and went down with all hands and hoofs. (This was the first rhino seen in Europe since Roman times; descriptions of it inspired Dürer's famous but inaccurate woodcut.) What the viewer sees is the tremendous animal standing on the ship's deck, legs awash in fast-rising seawater, head raised and eyes fixed on the hilly shoreline it could probably swim to if its hind leg weren't chained to the mast of the doomed vessel. You don't have to know all this, any more than you have to know what's going on in "Tur," a 2007 picture dominated by a hugely horned bull in a snowy landscape, but Ford is happy to fill you in. "That's an aurochs," he said, showing me a reproduction in the lavish, oversized art book on his work that Taschen published a year ago, in a limited edition of a hundred copies. (The edition included a signed Ford print, and cost seven thousand dollars; a smaller, less lavish version comes out this spring, for seventy dollars.) "It's a prehistoric bull, the one you see in the cave paintings at Lascaux. This is pretty much the first thing a human being ever painted. They were incredibly dangerous animals, who survived into relatively recent times."

Ford's studio is on the second floor of a former railroad warehouse, just beyond the tracks and close to the center of town. He didn't really start the big, narrative paintings he does now until he moved

The artist in his studio with two works in progress, "Housatonic Ghost Cats" and "The Island." Photomontage by Josef Astor.

here from Manhattan, in 1995, with his wife, Julie, and their two-year-old daughter, Lillian. (Their second child, Camellia, was born two years later.) The long, L-shaped studio has windows on one side, and two overstuffed and very beat-up armchairs, where he does most of his reading. The floor is littered with open books and magazines, sketches, photographs, images taken off the Internet, opened and unopened mail, extension cords, and overflowing cardboard boxes—one of them full of small plastic animal figurines, including a thylacine, which he uses to help him get different views of the creatures he's painting. Ford's hiking gear occupies an area of floor space in back—boots, backpack, rain gear, sleeping bag, and other items that sustain him on the weeklong, solo wilderness treks that his restless nature requires once or twice a year.

There are a few large bookcases, which his new studio assistant, Anna Booth, is trying to organize, but Ford usually manages to find whatever he's looking for in the chaos. Sweeping a mass of papers off a chair so that I could sit down, he picked up one of his well-worn art books and opened it to a reproduction of Géricault's "The Raft of the Medusa." "Géricault doesn't go away, does he?" Ford said.

"That's because he had a very contemporary, dark way of looking at things. The drawings that led up to this painting were very helpful to me in figuring how the shapes would fit together in my thylacine triptych. Looking at the Géricault was what made me realize I wanted to make an island of thylacines, sinking in the ocean."

I asked him about the difference between art and illustration. Springing up from his chair, he stumbled on a plastic animal, sent it flying with a kick, and returned carrying a book opened to Delacroix's "Liberty Leading the People." On one level, he said, the painting was as stupid and obvious as an election poster; what made it art was "all in the treatment." Ford said that he was interested in fudging the line between art and illustration; a lot of great art was illustration, and vice versa, depending on the degree of skill and imagination the artist brought to it. But there was another factor, too, and it involved the viewer's participation. "Norman Rockwell wanted to tackle civil rights," Ford said. "So what does he do? He does a painting from the point of view of a little black girl in a perfect Sunday dress, and there's a tomato splashed on the wall right near her head, and two U.S. marshals' legs on either side of her, and you have only one place to go—you're stuck with Norman Rockwell's interpretation. Some people love it, because you're off the hook, everyone understands it right away. Illustration can be a starting point, but to become art it has to open up and allow for other interpretations—then you get the kind of work I love most." He named Goya's "Los Caprichos" and "The Disasters of War." Also Bosch's "The Temptation of St. Anthony," works by Bruegel, Dürer, Giotto, and the nineteenth-century English landscape painter Samuel Palmer, and "that fantastic Winslow Homer image of a fox in the snow, with the crows. Nobody would say that's just illustration. It's a powerful and romantic work."

"In my case," he said, a little later, "I wanted to take the language of the nineteenth-century natural-history illustrators and use it in a way they would never have imagined—to plumb our own collective ways of thinking about the natural world and these beings we share the planet with."

Ford's interest in the natural world is familial. His pre-Civil War ancestors on both sides were plantation owners in Tennessee and Georgia, whose impoverished male descendants hewed to the values of the gentleman sportsman. Ford's parents turned their backs on the South and the past when they got married and moved to New York, but his father, Enfield Berry Ford, known since childhood as Flicky, remained an ardent fly fisherman and hiker all his life, and often took his wife and four children on fishing trips to Canada during the summer. They lived in Larchmont, and Flicky, who had once gone to the Art Students League and wanted to be a cartoonist, commuted to Manhattan, where he worked as an art director for Time Life, designing brochures and in-house publications. "He was a big personality, a big drinker, a womanizer, and a wild man," Ford said. "Sort of hard to be around when I was a teen-ager." When the womanizing broke up the marriage and Flicky left home for good, Walton, who was eleven at the time, remembers feeling relieved.

Both Walton and his brother Enfield (called Flick), the firstborn, who is six years older, started drawing when they were young. Their parents gave Flick a copy of Audubon's "Birds of America" one Christmas, and Walton copied many of the plates. Flick, who became a natural-history painter—his 2006 book, "Fish," is recognized as the best thing in its field—saw right away that Walton was a more gifted artist than he was. "From a very early age," he told me recently, "Walt was thinking about how to make an impact in the art world."

All Walton really cared about then was drawing and being in the woods (which were in short supply around Larchmont). "I was a bad kid," he told me. "I had dreadful grades. I never played football, or joined any of those things in school." He cut classes, shunned homework, and, in junior high school, smoked his share of pot. His college prospects looked dim, but then his mother, who was working as the director of development for Sleepy Hollow Restoration, in Tarrytown, saved the day by getting him into the summer art program at the Rhode Island School of Design. He did this for one summer, joyously ("I found that the things I could do were valued! I went from being fairly invisible in high school to being a star"), and built up a portfolio that was good enough to get him into RISD, which he entered in 1978. "I knew I was going to be O.K. then," he said. "From the time I was six, I'd wanted to be an artist."

In his second year, however, Ford decided to major in filmmaking. He wanted to tell stories, and he thought that he could do that better with film. The decision was reinforced by his friendship with Jeffrey Eugenides, who was then a student at nearby Brown University. They'd met in an acting class at Brown, where Eugenides's performance of a scene from David Mamet's "Sexual Perversity in Chicago" had been as much of an eyeopener for Ford as Ford's impersonation of an ape had been for Eugenides. "Jeff was one of the super-brains of our generation," Ford said. "And I was blown away. I began reading Mamet, and 'The Tin Drum,' and 'The Painted Bird,' and all sorts of stuff. The literary crowd at Brown sort of adopted me, because I was a paint-splattered hipster and more successful with women than they were." Eugenides, who won a Pulitzer Prize in 2003 for his novel "Middlesex," confirms this. "Walton was famous at school for his dexterity at drawing, for being funny, and for his all-American appeal to the ladies," he told me. "We were all girl-shy and nervous, and he was the opposite." The proof was Ford's success in winning Julie Jones, the most beautiful girl in his class at RISD and also, as he still maintains, the most gifted—she made fluent realist drawings of people in strange but convincing interiors. "I thought I was going to be a James Bond guy," Ford said, "but there she was. I was a goner." They started dating in their freshman year, when they were both eighteen, and they've been together ever since.

In their senior year, Walton and Julie were both picked for an honors-program semester in Rome. For Ford, the main event there was going to Assisi and seeing Giotto's cycle of paintings on the life of St. Francis. "It made the biggest impact on me of anything that happened at RISD," he said. "The storytelling is so clean and clear. It's unbelievably emotional without being overblown, like in the Sistine Chapel. I was supposed to make a film in Italy, but I couldn't finish it, because I just started painting and drawing again. I realized I was going to be a narrative painter."

It was hard going during the next ten years, finding his way in an art world where he often felt hopelessly out of step. After a tentative postgraduate stopover in Newport, Rhode Island, where Ford did drawings of beds, draperies, and other designer furnishings and Julie painted signs for shopkeepers, they made the inevitable move to New York, in 1983. To pay the rent on the apartment they found, in what was then a fairly rough neighborhood in the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn, Ford joined a group of slightly older RISD grads who had started a business renovating apartments in the Dakota, on Central Park West—doing cabinetry, wood refinishing, and other specialized jobs. Julie had been hired as the bookkeeper for a Manhattan jewelry firm run by the family of Walton's closest childhood friend, Walter McTeigue. Walton and Julie, who got married in 1985, both managed to make time for their own work. "I was doing large-scale oil paintings on wood, which looked something like Hudson River School landscapes," Ford told me. "It wasn't successful work." He also designed a few book jackets, and tried his hand at some illustrations for the *Times*, which turned them down. "I was very unsuccessful as an illustrator," he said. Julie's exquisite figure drawings and Walton's somewhat inchoate visual narratives seemed far removed from any of the trends in contemporary art. The spotlight then was on big, noisy, semi-figurative paintings by Julian Schnabel, David Salle, and the other so-called neo-expressionists, American and European, and on the graffiti-inspired generation of Jean-Michel Basquiat and Keith Haring. A few New York painters, including Eric Fischl and Mark Tansey,

were exploring forms of narrative realism, but Ford was way out on his own premodern, nineteenth-century limb.

Ford's early efforts did not go unnoticed. At the beginning of the nineteen-nineties, he had shows at two downtown galleries—Bess Cutler and Nicole Klagsbrun. Marcia Tucker, the director of the New Museum of Contemporary Art, liked Ford's work and put it in group shows (she also used Walton and Julie as occasional babysitters). When the couple moved to lower Manhattan, in 1992, to a loft on Chambers Street, Bill Arning, who ran the nonprofit art gallery White Columns, sent Irving Blum down to see Ford's work. Blum, the co-owner of the Blum-Helman Gallery, on Fifty-seventh Street, found the paintings "conservative, yet oddly beguiling." They were not right for his regular clients, he said, but Blum himself bought a watercolor bird drawing, done very much in the style of Audubon, and over the next few months he kept on buying more of them, for fifteen hundred dollars apiece. Ford had just started doing these Audubon knockoffs, and he was conflicted about it. Ever since childhood, hooked on Audubon's great images, he'd drawn birds and animals in his school notebooks, but he never thought that he could make art this way. "I thought it was for people who did duck stamps," he said. The watercolor images of birds he was doing now "looked exactly like Audubons," he said, "but there would be something wrong in each one. I did a sparrow hawk, on top of an enormous pile of sparrows he had killed—way too many."

Ford's ambivalent relationship with Audubon was something he had to work out. A trip to India helped. Julie had applied for a Fulbright Indo-American Fellowship, to study eighteenth-century Tantric designs. When the grant came through, two years later, in 1994, the Fords and their daughter Lillian, who was then a year and a half, spent the next six months immersed in a culture that Ford found thoroughly baffling. "You're starting from scratch in India," Ford said. "Physical gestures are different, you're not making connections, and you become so annoyed, and impatient, and missing the point. And then you think, Wow, that's what we do with cultures we don't understand. I'd already started doing those mer MOMA curator who is now the pseudo-Audubon pictures, trying to add another layer of meaning. I didn't do any painting in India, but when I got back I started right away using Indian birds and animals to get at these issues of global misunderstanding." In a jewel-like etching called "Bangalore," an Indian kingfisher perches in a tree, along with a gaudy, American-made bass lure. "What's he doing with it?" Ford asked, rhetorically. "Impossible to tell. It doesn't belong in India."

Two months after their return, in 1995, the Fords moved to the Berkshires. Walter McTeigue, Walton's childhood friend, had been living there since 1992; he had reëstablished his jewelry business in Great Barrington after trying to make it as a dairy farmer. When the Fords came up for a visit, McTeigue told them that the old farmhouse he had once lived in was available and that they could rent it for seven hundred dollars a month, about half of what they were paying in the city, and they decided to give it a try.

Getting out of New York enabled Ford to make his peace, at last, with Audubon. "Anybody who reads up on Audubon is going to have mixed feelings about him," he told me. "He was a braggart, a liar, and just too trigger-happy, even for that time. He killed hundreds and hundreds of birds he didn't need. He shot things off the deck of a ship, and just let them fall in the ocean. As I often say, he was more like a National Rifle Association guy than an Audubon Society guy. But the paintings are beautiful." What was it about them, I asked, that appealed to him so much? "I liked their weirdness," he said. "It wasn't realism. He'd shoot the birds, and pin them down on a board with wires, in strange positions. Most natural-history artists today try to make what look like painted photographs, but Audubon gives you that pre-photographic way of looking, where the paper functions as air."

Ford can't praise Audubon without giving you the other side. "He was an awkward draftsman. After he'd painted the birds, he wanted to paint all the North

were painted around the turn of the last

American mammals, and there you see how hard it was for him to deal with perspective, and anatomy, and the animal's way of moving. Audubon's son drew most of the larger mammals, which are terrible, but Audubon did the smaller ones, and you can see animals that were in every way superior to his in the work of other nineteenth-century natural-history artists, like Edward Lear. People think of Lear for 'The Owl and the Pussycat' and 'The Book of Nonsense,' but he was better than Audubon as a natural-history artist." Ford readily concedes that Audubon is the cornerstone of his own work, but, to me, Ford's conceptual wildness—the tension between nature and culture, fornication and extinction, the animal and the human—makes him contemporary in ways that Audubon could hardly have imagined. As Ford says, Audubon would not have painted an island of doomed thylacines.

Ford and Julie and the girls now live in Southfield, a pretty village ten miles east of Great Barrington. The family's pets include a guinea pig, a gerbil, two horses (which they board at a nearby stable), a rabbit, and a small black schipperke, the same breed of dog that Walton had as a child. Julie stopped painting when Camellia was born, to give more time to the children, but recently she's started to work again, in a space that Walton partitioned off for her in his Great Barrington studio.

"I don't think I became an artist until about ten years ago," Ford told me. The key element for him was giving up oil paint. Not many artists have established major reputations with watercolor alone. Charles Burchfield did so, and Winslow Homer's watercolors are preferred in some quarters to his oils, but, because watercolors are on paper, the art market has always priced them well below works on canvas. Ford was coming to understand, however, that the traditional medium for natural-history art was what best suited his particular talents.

His first show at Paul Kasmin's gallery, in 1997, included as many oil paintings as watercolors. The pictures in that show were priced low, from five to ten thousand dollars, and "there wasn't a big rush" to buy them, Kasmin recalls. "The subject matter made a lot of people think I'd had a complete lapse of judgment, or taste." But the market was opening up to more eclectic kinds of work, and Kasmin eventually sold nearly every painting in the show. During the next few years, working mainly in watercolor, Ford became increasingly skillful and a great deal more confident. His pictures got bigger and more complex, his stories more outrageous. In some of them, the focus is on one or two birds or animals, which are often engaged in violent combat, copulation, or both. "Chingado" shows a Spanish bull raping a Mexican jaguar, whose fangs are sunk in the bull's throat. "They're coupling to create Mexico," Ford told me, airily, on one of my later visits to the studio. Other paintings contain a multiplicity of creatures whose plight refers to historical events or legends. At first glance, the long procession of great auks in "Funk Island" winds, lemming-like, over a rocky landscape, toward the distant fires and cauldrons that signal their extinction as a species. Clear enough, but what is going on in that huge cloud of smoke from the fires? Closer examination reveals dozens of naked men and women in erotic combinations. Ford's research had disclosed that the flightless auks were clubbed to death, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, so that their plumage could be used in feather beds and pillows. "This was the global economy in action, right?" he said. "It was like a goddam Auschwitz for birds, so the Marquis de Sade and Casanova could do their fucking on feather beds!"

The stories he was telling required more space, and his paintings expanded to provide it. He bought his paper in twenty-yard rolls, and cut it himself. Ten feet by five was about the limit, he found, because watercolor requires Plexiglas to protect it, and anything larger would make the framed pictures too heavy. He started out by mopping the whole sheet with water, to keep it from shrinking unevenly when he put the paint on, and then, to give his pictures the foxed look of old engravings or book pages, he'd paint the edges with a wash of water and raw umber. "This is something I've had to make up as I go," he told me. Ford also started working with a master printer in New Hampshire named Peter Pettengill; the series of six aquatint etchings they produced, over a seven-year period, are the same size as Audubon's Double Elephant Folio prints.

Ford works slowly, producing only

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three or four large paintings a year, on average, and even in the currently downsizing art market there is a waiting list of people who want them. The buyers tend not to be well-known collectors of contemporary art. A woman from Tennessee owns "Falling Bough," a large and dramatic painting of passenger pigeons; it hangs in her apartment in the Dakota, where Ford worked when he first came to New York. Mick Jagger recently bought "Hyrcania," a painting of an Iranian tiger from Ford's 2008 show, and the Smithsonian Institution acquired "Tur," the great aurochs. "Nila," his largest work to date—a life-size Indian elephant in full stride, composed in twenty-two sections and measuring twelve by eighteen feet over all—occupies an entire ballroom wall in a Rhinebeck estate. So far, museums have held back. The Museum of Modern Art's only Walton Ford is a small print—a version of "Bangalore." The Whitney acquired a complete set of his large-scale prints, and included them in a group show in 2003; it still has no paintings. The Brooklyn Museum gave him a solo show in 2006, did very little to promote it (no catalogue), and bought nothing from it. Ford's New York shows have been favorably reviewed, for the most part, with an emphasis on his brilliant craftsmanship and on what the *Times'* Randy Kennedy, writing about the Brooklyn Museum show, described as an atmosphere where "the calm of Audubon gives way to the creepiness of Francis Bacon and sometimes even to the horrors of Wes Craven."

Ford's big pictures now bring around four hundred thousand dollars, and one of them, the "Lisbon Rhinoceros," sold last year for six hundred and fifty thousand. This is well below the millions that Jeff Koons, Damien Hirst, and other entrepreneur-artists have pulled down in recent years, but Ford has no gripes. "I do exactly what I want to do, and I get well paid," as he put it. "So I don't sweat global dominance." The question of whether he's an artist or an illustrator still hangs over him, although less so as time goes on. "I don't think he's an illustrator," Robert Storr, a former MOMA curator who is now the dean of the School of Art at Yale, told me last fall. "Basically, illustration serves to depict something that already exists as a verbal idea. Ford uses illustrational techniques. He's taken a lot from Audubon, and he's done it very well, but Audubon is not just an illustrator. He's a serious and interesting artist, and I think Ford has understood the ways in which his work is potent."

One crisp, sunny day in November, I spent two hours with Ford in the American Museum of Natural History. We had lunch first, in a restaurant across from Lincoln Center. On the façade of the Metropolitan Opera House, Ford's fifty-foot-high banner of Mephistopheles, in the form of a goat standing on its hind legs, announced the new production of Berlioz's "The Damnation of Faust." Ford was excited about the banner, which he could see from the restaurant, and about being in New York. "I feel like an animal out of the cage," he said. "I spend all that time by myself in the studio, and then I come here and drink wine and look at beautiful people." He had on his city clothes, black jeans and a Western-style checked shirt with mother-of-pearl snaps, and his energy level was high. He finished off his plate of charcuterie in short order, and ate half of mine, announcing, "As long as they make prosciutto, I'm never going to be a vegetarian."

Ford has been visiting the natural-history museum since he was five. Whenever he starts a painting, he said, he goes there first and makes drawings of the bird or animal he's going to depict. "I have no excuse to get anything wrong," he said. "They don't move, they don't go to sleep, they don't hide like they would at the zoo." For his thylacine painting, he looked up images in the files of the museum's mammalogy department, where he is well regarded. Recently, he brought his two daughters, who are horse-mad and ride several days a week, to see the museum's exhibition "The Horse."

We went first to the Hall of North American Birds, to look at some of the museum's oldest exhibits—small-scale dioramas showing peregrine falcons, barn swallows, shorebirds, and other local species against backgrounds that were painted around the turn of the last century. "Look at this one," he said, of a bucolic Hudson River scene with a small sailboat tied up to a dock. "That's about as exquisite as a work of art gets." The artistry of the dioramas seemed to excite him even more than the wildlife in them. Stray visitors stopped to listen as he talked about Carl Akeley, the naturalist and explorer whose pioneering innovations in taxidermy had made the museum's most spectacular dioramas possible. "Akeley really built this museum," he said. "He gathered a group of artists who worked here into the nineteen-thirties, creating the dioramas. You'll never get that degree of perfection again, with this kind of weather and light and atmosphere." We moved on, at a fast clip, to the Hall of North American Mammals, where, he said, the artists' techniques had reached their highest level. Ford knew which artist had done each diorama. His favorites were James Perry Wilson and Carl Rungius. "Wilson is my man," he said, almost beside himself with admiration. "He's everywhere here. He did the jaguar, and the coyotes." We stood for quite a while looking at Wilson's diorama of two gray wolves running in the snow, at dusk, in Gunflint Lake, Minnesota. "Isn't this one of the most beautiful things in New York?" Ford asked, in a hushed voice.

Before leaving, Ford insisted that we look at the gorillas in the Akeley Hall of African Mammals. The gorilla diorama is huge, a mountainous landscape overlooking a distant valley, with six or seven gorillas going about their pacific, herbivorous business. "Carl Akeley died right here," Ford said, pointing to a spot in the foreground. "There were two expeditions for the gorilla exhibit. On the first one, they shot the animals and brought the skins to New York, and made the plaster models. Then Akeley went back to Africa to collect the plants, and he died there, of dysentery. He'd said this was his favorite place in the world, so they buried him there—right in that little hollow. But his bones are no longer there. People went back later, and found the grave had been robbed." A fine Walton Ford story, and, naturally, Ford did a painting based on it. Called "Sanctuary" (1998), it depicts the same landscape, with a life-size gorilla in a tree, cradling in his black hand a human skull. "Akeley collected them," Ford explained, "and they collected him right back."

The thylacine triptych isn't finished yet. Ford stopped working on it temporarily and began a painting of mountain lions, for Kasmin to take to Florida for the Art Basel Miami Beach fair in December. (It sold before the fair opened, for four hundred thousand dollars.) The mountain lions were nearly done when I visited his studio in mid-November. Lately, he explained, there had been numerous sightings of these big cats in the Berkshires, "although not one sighting is documented, and there's no evidence—no scat, no tree scratchings, no attacks on pets or joggers. Mountain lions have been extinct in New England for decades." Ford's painting is set in a local cemetery, where several pairs of mountain lions are copulating among the gravestones. "They're making more ghost cats for people to see," he said. His are life-size, and very lifelike.

"I've never had more ideas," Ford said happily. "I've never been better at what I do, so I may as well crank it out." Tom Ford, the designer, has commissioned him to do ten very large paintings for a twenty-foot-square gallery in his home in Santa Fe. The paintings will cover all four walls, and the subjects will be based on the American West. Ford owns several works by Walton, including "Space Monkey," a 2001 watercolor that was inspired by Patti Smith's song of the same title. When Patti Smith came across the picture online, she e-mailed Walton, and he answered, and now they are friends.

"I feel like we have a shared world, through literature and childhood impulses," Smith told me recently. "I sent him a poem of mine, about the last dodo, and we might do something together with that." Smith thinks Ford's work is on the verge of breaking through into something new, which she sees as "an almost Turner-like violence."

When I asked Ford where he thought his work might be heading, he looked momentarily uncertain. "Oh, crap," he said, massaging his head. "I hope I'm still going to do something more interesting than I'm doing now. I feel like, right now, I'm an interesting minor artist, a footnote in art history, you know? I've got this territory that's my own, and I'm making watercolors that nobody else can make, but I'm not pushing the language of making pictures in any new direction. There's nothing I'm doing that wasn't done better by Géricault. But maybe that will change. Anyway, I'm not there yet." ♦

Art in America

King of the Beasts

In his life-size watercolors of animals, Walton Ford fashions allegories about the violence and destruction attending human civilization.

FAYE HIRSCH
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In his life-size watercolors of animals, Walton Ford fashions allegories about the violence and destruction attending human civilization.

INTERVIEW BY FAYE HIRSCH

Chained to the deck of a sinking galleon, the massive straining beast in Walton Ford's triptych Loss of the Lisbon Rhinoceros *(2008) is among the most sublime of the many creatures he has painted. With a taste for perverse natural history anecdotes and a penchant for hyperbolic fantasy, Ford is an animalier for our era of bio-apocalypse—and a worthy heir to J.J. Audubon, J.J. Grandville, Edward Lear and Carl E. Akeley, dioramist of the American Museum of Natural History in New York, among the antecedents he frequently cites. In Ford's recent exhibition at Paul Kasmin Gallery in New York, the rhino shared walls with an extinct bull, the European aurochs, likewise depicted in a three-panel watercolor some 8 feet high and 13 feet wide, stamping his hooves in a snowy landscape littered with human bones. Ford's animals come large, and he always positions them front and center, making them especially startling. The biggest one, at 12 by 19 feet, is a 22-panel elephant (*Nila, *1999-2000), and Ford says that soon he will paint a whale.*

In 1997, working in the manner he had developed in his earlier watercolors of birds, faux-foxing the surface and adding inscriptions in an antiquated cursive to give them the quality of pages from old natural history books, Ford made the first of his to-scale images of quadrupeds, Thanh Hoang. *This is a Vietnamese tiger that in Ford's version is marked by stripes forming silhouettes of historical figures. Ford never shows his beasts apart from human culture, whether triumphing over it temporarily or succumbing to it in tragic defeat. A grizzly comes upon a human corpse in a hollow log; a polar bear roars above a vanitas of skull, hourglass and playing cards caught in the permafrost. A doomed buffalo bloodies some marauding wolves in a French formal garden; a sick monkey expires in a satin-upholstered chaise longue. Like Audubon, Ford moved from birds, which he continues to depict, to mammals. Particularly disturbing is* Falling Bough *(2002), in which a huge branch is so heavily laden with passenger pigeons engaging in all manner of grotesque habits—shades of Bosch and Brueghel—that it breaks off the tree and hurtles through the air. Only through such a phantasm could Ford capture the hallucinatory power of Audubon's written account of the extinct North American species, which at its peak, during the continent's colonization, numbered in the billions.*

"What it portends, I know not," reads a wondering inscription in the margin of Falling Bough. *It is a quote about the vast flocks of the birds by Thomas Dudley, a 17th-century governor of Massachusetts, and is one of myriad inscriptions that appeared in Ford's work until a few years ago. In his 2006-07 retrospective of some 50 watercolors from the previous 10 years, these impressively researched texts were peered at closely by visitors seeking clues to the content of images so immediately gratifying yet so unsettling. The exhibition is past, but a new publication by Taschen,* Pancha Tantra, *surveys Ford's work in a limited edition volume whose ambitious scale (320 pages, 19½ by 14¾ inches, with 16 gatefolds) is reminiscent of Audubon's famous double-elephant folio,* Birds of America *(1827-38). In* Pancha Tantra *one can see how, over time, Ford has reduced the quantity of written matter—quotes from literature and natural history, snippets about economics, Latin classifications—in his work. Now he mostly allows the elements of the scenarios to speak for themselves, from carefully observed fur, scales and feathers to dramatic poses and narrative devices. I met the 48-year-old artist—a keen and voluble raconteur—at the Kasmin exhibition in June.*

Walton Ford:* Loss of the Lisbon Rhinoceros, *2008, 98¼ by 148¼ inches. All works this article watercolor, gouache, ink and pencil on paper.

Scipio and the Bear, *2007, 59½ by 119½ inches.*

Faye Hirsch: Maybe we could begin by talking a bit about *Pancha Tantra*. What really struck me about the book is its scale, which is reminiscent of the Audubon folio. You must have thought about that a little.
Walton Ford: Benedikt Taschen [the publisher] thought of it. Taschen kind of jump-started this idea of these megasized limited edition books. They've been accused sometimes of doing them gratuitously, for money—that the splashiness or the outrageousness of it isn't always warranted by the subject matter. In this case, it was completely justified. Scale is so critical to my process. But also—the idea of museums, the idea of dioramas, of giant natural history libraries that go on and on and on, of going through musty archives and all that. You had to get that feeling from the book without losing sight of the fact that it was contemporary art. I didn't want to make a fake-artifact book. It's a fine line to walk. You don't want it to be just theatrical; you want it to have something to do with your processes and what you're trying to say.

As soon as Benedikt saw my work, he understood exactly. And the book kept growing the more he knew about the work; he understood we had to make something unusually large and elaborate, and reminiscent of these early books. He had done a Peter Beard book that had a similar feel in terms of the binding and the way it was put together. He went a little further with mine in terms of these large foldouts and huge details.
FH: Have you ever been able to sit with one of the big Audubon books?
WF: Yes, I have. Also other natural history books that are put together in a similar way. There's the *Description of Egypt* [1809] that Napoleon Bonaparte commissioned. They have a copy of that at the Explorers Club, of which I'm a member—though I haven't been anywhere! I mean, not really. I've traveled, backpacking style, like the Lonely Planet, but I've never done anything that would qualify as an expedition as far as the Explorers Club is concerned. They've had plenty of photographers in the club, but not that many painters who tap into the history of natural history art the way that I do. Carl Akeley [1864-1926], who designed the Natural History Museum dioramas and was a great artist—the background paintings that he commissioned for the museum are all hanging in the Explorers Club. And those things are an enormous inspiration to me. I've been looking at his dioramas ever since I was a kid. So for me to arrive at that club and see them was a thrill.

Anyway, they have a copy of the *Description of Egypt*, and it's every bit as big and elaborate as the Audubon book. Americans, because we have Audubon, tend to imagine that those are sort of the ultimate natural history books. But really they're part of a tradition. Edward Lear was every bit as accomplished a natural history artist as Audubon, but he didn't have the focus. See, the great thing about Audubon was, he didn't have very much talent, but with his enormous drive and energy he was able to accomplish something that was quite spectacular.
FH: I started reading Audubon after seeing your work.
WF: His stuff is amazing, and it's disturbing—a lot more disturbing than you would think.
FH: It's not so much that he did these cruel things; it's the combination of his amazing description and his love of what he was doing, at the same time that you feel he understood that so much was being lost.
WF: He could see it was being lost, but he kind of flip-flopped back and forth between the idea of progress and a sort of hate for nature. He felt that the romanticizing of Indians was foolish; he thought that George Catlin was an idiot for thinking that there was any such thing as a noble savage.
FH: He'll go through a very loving description of a bird and describe what he's doing with it, and then at the very end there will be something cruel . . .
WF: Or bizarre. Like the turkey vultures, where he's trying to find out how they find their prey, so he's like putting their eyes out and then putting dead things in front of them to find out, Do they see it?
FH: They smell it, right? In interviews, it seems you don't want people to think you're some kind of environmentalist—but it's as if you just don't want these animals to be victims.
WF: Well, I want to tell their story on some level—whether it's a narrative imposed from outside or their own story. The two big pieces in the Kasmin show are from those different points of view. The aurochs, for example [*Tur*, 2007], is an animal that went extinct before it could be described—how it behaved or what it did, what kind of life it lived. It was the first animal that was ever painted by a human being. It's the bull that you see in the Hall of Bulls at Lascaux. This bovine was the prototype—the primal bull that all cows are descended from. The animal today that is probably closest to it in DNA is the fighting bull of Spain. What we know from the fossil evidence is that the things were like 6 feet tall at the shoulder—just what I painted. They were

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"What is it like, if you're a black bear in 1820, and you have the misfortune of coming across Audubon?"

enormous! The last ones were killed in the 17th century—but throughout, they were completely defined by their role in human culture. There's some kind of magic going on in prehistoric art with these bulls.

FH: By magic, you mean that's why they painted them?

WF: They're not sure, but the bulls were painted in kind of a compulsive way. That's a whole other story. Let's just say they were very important images, these bulls. And Julius Caesar, when he invades Germany he takes note of these animals. He says they are without a doubt the most terrifying animals he's ever seen. He says they're fast, they're as big as elephants, they're completely mean and furious all the time. They won't suffer any other animal around them without attacking, and they've got these tremendous horns. And he gave credit to the Gauls that he was slaughtering by saying that they hunt them and make cups out of their horns.

Now, to hunt the aurochs in prehistoric times, you had to organize. You couldn't just hunt them by yourself. And once you start to organize you have a leader, and once you have a leader he's saying, I get a bigger share. And you get political structures going. So it's possible that the monarchies of Europe came out of the hunting of this bull. In some ways it's the most important human/animal interaction in Western culture. The aurochs were in the Polish forests in medieval times and on through the Renaissance, and only the nobility could hunt them. If a peasant was caught, God forbid, putting snares in the royal hunting ground, they'd break him on the wheel or something. So what I painted was this animal arriving as a regal creature—the ultimate animal to hunt.

And there's an epilogue to this that's incredible. The Nazis, based on that little bit in Caesar writing about Gaul and writing about the Germans, they thought, What we need to do now is take modern cattle, and back-breed them, which is a process of trying to re-create former species. And they back-bred modern cattle and came up with something that they thought was an aurochs. It was done by the Heck brothers, who had the Berlin Zoo. And they back-bred and back-bred and back-bred and they had this thing, this ur-aurochs. Well now they're just called Heck's Cattle, because everyone knows from DNA research that the Nazis didn't come up with an aurochs—it's extinct. They just made a big ugly mean-looking slob of a bull.

So my painting is not only the last aurochs, in the regal sense. It's the aurochs that the Nazis would have wanted and didn't get. It's the ultimate status symbol of a Fascist, coming out of a Caspar Friedrich-like forest into a snowy landscape of people who have been broken on the wheel in the background, and shreds of human beings in the snow. I'm posing it in a super-muscular Leni Riefenstahl kind of attitude. And the aurochs is a Nazi.

FH: Could you talk about the way you set up the narrative in *Scipio and the Bear* [2007], which is based on a famous essay by Audubon?

WF: A farmer sends his servant to Audubon, when Audubon is traveling. They want him to help clear out some bears who have been eating the corn. And they go out on this rampage one night, and they kill all these bears. They run them up trees, they set fire to trees, they cut down trees that have bears in them, and they let the dogs kill the bears. They set fires in the cornfields. There are descriptions of slaves battling the bears barehanded. Between the fires and the horsemen and the slaves and the bears that were being chased around, the hunt destroyed more corn than the farmer would have lost to the bears initially. The farmer must have just been sitting around after Audubon left going, Oh, what did I do? I set loose these maniacs! "To procure as much sport as possible," is how Audubon put it.

In this case, it was very important for me to do the reverse of what I did with the aurochs—where I told it from the humans' point of view—and tell it from the bears' point of view. What is it like, if you're a black bear in 1820, and you have the misfortune of coming across Audubon?

FH: Are they cubs?

WF: Just small bears—not quite babies, but they'd still mess you up.

FH: You look at the picture, and you see the bears up close in the treetop, and you see their bellies glowing and wonder why. And then you see, in the distance, the same scene, except the whole scene, with the fires lit beneath the trees. It reminded me of Renaissance continuous narrative.

WF: Yes, absolutely. My senior year at the Rhode Island School of Design [1982], I was lucky enough to go to RISD's palazzo in Rome. The biggest influence on me, that you can still see even in this work, was Giotto, at Assisi especially—not just Giotto but Lorenzetti and, downstairs, the St. Martin cycle by Simone Martini. This is, in my opinion, the ultimate "form-follows-function" kind of narrative. They're so stripped down and perfect. When those same stories are told in the High Renaissance, they are completely confused. You can't tell what's going on in the Sistine Chapel! You can't tell if that's Jonah—the whale is way the hell back there. They're just a bunch of naked people writhing around—it's really beautiful, very amazing, but it's not perfect storytelling for illiterates. Which is exactly what Giotto did.

So I have two—or more—points of view that I like to take. One where the culture takes over the story, where the natural history of the moment is of no importance to me. The idea of the animal behaving in a way that is natural, or intrinsic to the animal, is bullshit. It's all about our imposition of culture. That bit from Oscar Wilde in *The Decay of Lying*, where he talks about how nature imitates art, and not the other way around. We're always saying, Go to nature as the great model. But he says, Don't go to nature, go to other artists. If you want a beautiful landscape, you can't do better than

Falling Bough, *2002, 60¾ by 119½ inches.*

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Constable. If you go out in nature, he says, things are going to be uncomfortable; they're going to be asymmetrical. They're only going to be good when they imitate art. He goes on to say, There were no fogs in London until Turner painted them.

There's so much brilliance in that, because it has to do with the way we see the world. You can't see these animals or anything without filtering them through this cultural lens, which is this very old art-historical blah blah blah. It's all theory. But I have my different approaches to the animal. With the bears, I'm trying to put you where the bears are rather than where Audubon is. But with the bull I'm putting you where the Heck brothers were, in the Berlin Zoo, trying to breed. It's their fever vision. But that doesn't have anything to do with the poor animal any more. Whereas the bears have everything to do with the poor animal and I'm trying to forget Audubon for a minute.

FH: On this point of art after art, would you talk about *Loss of the Lisbon Rhinoceros* [2008] and Dürer?

WF: The two big pieces—the aurochs and the rhinoceros—are kind of bookends to the approaches that I'm taking, though there are overlapping areas. With the rhino, the fever vision is Dürer's woodcut. The story being, in brief: The Portuguese got a rhinoceros onto a ship in 1515 and decided to send it to Lisbon for King Manuel to have. It was the first Indian rhinoceros to make it to Europe—all the way around the Cape of Good Hope to Lisbon. And then, diplomatically, Manuel decided he should give it to Pope Leo X. So they put it back in a boat, but only after Lisbon had gone nuts seeing this animal. It was a sensation. People did sketches of it, and wrote descriptions. So the ship leaves, and it goes down in the Mediterranean with the rhinoceros on board.

Now, there are various theories, but I believe a sketch made its way to Dürer, and he did his fanciful riff on it; first in a sepia drawing, which is absolutely beautiful, and then a woodcut that became a very popular image. He wrote that he had done it from life, but there's no way, because it's full of these horny protuberances and plates that real rhinoceroses don't have. Overall, it's a very good drawing, if you blur your eyes. It's definitely an Indian rhinoceros. But Kenneth Clark, or someone like that, wrote, Oh, he's covered in metal armor, and that's taken over people's ability to actually look at Dürer's rhino. If you really look at that rhinoceros he does not have armor. What he has are shell-like structures that are from crustaceans and insects and crabs, and things like that. There's nothing man-made about him. Dürer was capable of drawing a machine or a knight in armor. And this is not what he drew. When you look at it—you've seen a lobster before, and everything on this rhino looks like it comes off a lobster or a horseshoe crab.

I don't know if Dürer knew that this rhino drowned. But it's fantastic that this thing was reborn as a sea creature after it drowned in a most unnatural way. The rhino was chained to the deck of the ship so he couldn't get out of his situation. He could have probably swum to shore—he would have been the only survivor.

FH: So you don't think Dürer was trying to say something about how he drowned and wound up with all these crustaceans?

WF: Well no—this was the way he went about creating monsters. Leonardo made suggestions about how you create monsters and that's exactly what you do. You take things from the seashore, horns from goats and things like that, and you take reptiles, and you put them all together. When you look at the devil creature in *Knight, Death and the Devil*, you can see that Dürer must have had a small natural history collection that he gathered off of beaches, and horns from horned animals, and certain types of

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"I didn't see any reason why I couldn't use an anachronistic language. It wasn't tapped out in any way for me."

pelts. If you look at those really good monsters by Cranach or any of them—Brueghel, or Bosch especially—that's how they did it. They had beetles, a lot of insects, mixed with lowly animals like goats, pigs.

FH: And what about your rhinoceros?

WF: What I suddenly got interested in was that the boat sank with a rhinoceros chained to the deck. What did *that* look like? It's as simple as that. Dürer's rhino ended up being *the* image of a rhino for 300 years. Even after other rhinoceroses arrived in Europe, this image just trumped them. And you can tell, because it will have these weird horns that only Dürer drew. It totally steamrolled the real rhinos that did make it to Europe. But it came so close to being a real rhino. If the rhino had arrived in Rome, Leonardo and all these people would have drawn it, and it would have been perfect. Because there are life drawings of the elephant that Pope Leo owned—elephants make it into Renaissance art without all of these crazy elaborations. Also elephants are easier to have around. A rhino's a very difficult thing.

FH: Yeah . . . how did they get it onto the ship?

WF: Strangely enough, it sounds very tractable, from the description.

FH: They got a nice one.

WF: Which I don't think is very easy to do. What I wanted was the rhino that Dürer never saw—that he wished he'd seen, really. But right at the dramatic moment when he's about to become art history, the moment when the actual animal, the way he really looked, sunk under the waves and became this crustacean. This was a transformational moment that brought me chills. I thought, I have to paint that.

FH: Getting to the idea that you've pared down your work, I'd like to address the tiger [*Hyrcania*, 2007] that's in the Kasmin show. This is the second version of a tiger you've done. Why did you revisit it?

WF: I was painting birds in the style of Audubon up until the first tiger, *Thanh Hoang* [1997]. One of the things I always loved about Audubon's *Birds of North America*, as opposed to certain other natural history books, is how he painted everything life-size. So that you're really looking at a specimen, in a sense, that's been posed on the page. Audubon was an autodidact. What Velázquez or Sargent or artists like that understand is that if you want to convey the impression of life-size, you set the subject inside the frame a little bit. If you actually paint it life-size it's pushing up against the picture plane in a way that looks unnatural. So unless you want to make things look heroic, and bigger than life, you recess them and make them a bit smaller than life; and then they look like they're in space. And that gives the viewer comfort, in a sense. When you push something right up against the picture plane, you get something else altogether. The thrill about Audubon is that he gives you dimensions of the actual bird—it's 3 inches from the tail to the tip. I always liked that, because I thought there was a tension in it.

I had seen a similar thing in India. When maharajas shot tigers, they had their court painters measure the tiger and do paintings of the tiger with certain markings and stripes that were unique to the tiger they shot. A portrait of the tiger, life-size, the same way Audubon did. I forget where I saw them—I think they were in Jaipur, in the palace there. The thing's 10 feet long! Because the tiger was 8 feet from tail to nose. And 4 or 5 feet high. And they have little Hindi notes on them about the animal, about where it was shot, what date it was and certain particulars about the hunt. It's amazing, to see this tiger. Oh my god, there it is, and it's pushed right up against the picture plane, just like Audubon. And it's painted in a very primitive Mughal style.

FH: Which is actually a miniaturist style.

WF: It was a completely thrilling discovery: a particular portrait of a tiger that was shot in the 18th century. There it is, I could know how big he was and estimate how heavy he was. If I could read Hindi, it would probably say how heavy he was. I got thrilled by that and decided I had to do it. But in painting that first tiger—I think it's a successful piece, but I was still in a mode where I believed that you had to put everything that you knew into every picture. Young artists do this. Though I was a late bloomer—I wasn't even that young, I was in my 30s. But I wasn't a mature enough artist to let it alone. So I just crammed it full of every folk tale I read about tigers, and I put hidden figures in all the stripes. It's a Vietnamese tiger that tells the entire martial history of Vietnam. There are female warriors from the fifth century who fought against the Chinese in those stripes, French soldiers, generals, everything. I mean, it's just too much.

And the terrible thing is I really fudged it. I had this medieval bestiary, in which I read about fooling a tiger by throwing a glass ball at it. My feeling at the time was that this was a mean, Western trick, like the kind we used to try and trick the Vietnamese. In the 13th-century bestiary, the story goes, if you're going to steal a tiger cub, you steal it from the mother tiger, and you gallop off on horseback, and you start throwing these reflective glass balls over your shoulder. When the female tiger sees her reflection she thinks it's her cub, and she curls up to nurse it. She realizes she's been fooled, flies into a rage and comes after you again. And this keeps happening until you get away.

But I really didn't read the myth carefully. If I had, I would have noticed it said, This is how you hunt the tigers in Hyrcania. And I looked up Hyrcania—I don't know if it's Greek or Latin—but it's essentially Iran! And the tiger was the Persian tiger—a subspecies that's extinct now. And I thought, Oh, I dropped this into some sort of picture about Vietnam when I never should have. I realized that I had to revisit that story.

FH: So you overloaded the first image, *Thanh Hoang*.

Thanh Hoang, *1997, 60½ by 119½ inches.*

Hyrcania, *2007, 60 by 119½ inches.*

WF: It's really fun to look at, but the only justification I had for putting the story in is that I put in every myth about how the tiger got his stripes—he was tied up to a tree, and the tree was set on fire, and the stripes were burned into his skin. I put Chinese myths in, and Western myths, without knowing about Hyrcania and how that would fit in. And now the world is the way it is now.
FH: Mmm . . . how convenient!
WF: And the most perfect conceptual lock for me was that this is exactly what people are afraid of in that part of the world! They're afraid we're going to steal their young! That hateful Western ways are going to infect their culture through the young, and that these illusionary children, they're not really recognizable, are going West—they're leaving you, and you're left with this . . . this phantom. The reflection. The thing that you wanted is no longer your kid—it's just you, reflected. Without that fear, you don't fly airplanes into buildings. You don't do that unless you feel that kind of rage.

So now it was going to be super-simple. It was going to be this extinct tiger, the Persian tiger. And I decided to focus on a completely different aspect of the story—the moment when the tiger realizes that it's been fooled. That this is not its cub, that this is just a mockery and a reflection. It looks up to see the rider making off with its child.
FH: And the landscape is very beautiful—it looks like cherry trees in bloom.
WF: Iran is a gorgeous country. And the way that it's portrayed in Persian miniatures is always in the spring—they have almond trees and pear trees—those parts of the world are very, very beautiful in the spring, before the landscape gets blasted. I did enough research to know that this is a very characteristic Persian mountain landscape, with the flowering trees and those fields. And what's interesting is that when you start looking at photos of Iran, you see the same kind of mountains and colors and palette that you see in the Persian miniatures.
FH: And the tiger's to scale.
WF: Exactly—in that weird Audubony kind of way. As if you're in the room with the animal. It's not recessed in space. I do a one-to-one thing. And I tend to paint the large version of the animal. It's fun to paint them as big as they get.
FH: You do your paintings on very large sheets of paper. How do you prepare the paper?
WF: I have 20-yard rolls of watercolor paper 60 inches high. I roll out 10 feet of watercolor paper and rip it to size. I mop it with water, then I drip it with browns and ochers and umbers to make it foxed and aged. I just give it a little history—but I paint the history on. You don't use tea, as people think, to age paper. You use paint, because then you can control it.

When it's dry, I pin it to a big board and put it on two easels that I can crank up and down so I can work on different areas. I do many, many pencil drawings—erase and draw, erase and draw, until I have the animal the way I want it. I go to the Museum of Natural History if the animal is on display, or get a "backstage pass" there to do some studies. My studio is littered with studies I've done at the Museum of Natural History. Those are the particulars of the animal, and they're right out of the method of any natural history artist—you try to get the fur direction right and all that kind of nonsense.

And then the painting: Certain tasks have to be done rapidly and all in one shot, and you can't make any mistakes. Watercolor, like fresco, is something that moves forward, unlike oil, where you can back up. I read a Calvin Tomkins piece about John Currin where he's scraping a leg out and repainting it, scraping a leg out and repainting it, scraping a leg out and repainting it—but I have to get it right the first time. I can maybe adjust a detail here and there in a reverse way by just sort of removing some of the pigment with water and then repainting an area of some detail, but no big revisions can be made. When I started to do *Thanh Hoang*, I realized that's what I have to do—plan everything out ahead of time. Completely nail your drawing down before you start painting. That's what I mean about not repainting a leg a hundred times. If you really do a careful drawing ahead of time, then you know that the leg will be fine. You don't have to scrape it out and repaint it. It won't be wonky or weird.

But, of course, one of the things that John is trying to do is make the thing strange. I bet with his facility it's probably easier just to paint it correctly. He's deliberately making it disturbingly wacky, you know what I mean.
FH: Clearly you, too, are working in a historical tradition. You must have a complicated relationship to it.
WF: I get very uncomfortable with some kinds of academic, reactionary figurative art. You know, where it's catering to the attitude, Oh, the contemporary art world, it's going to hell in a handbasket. And there are a lot of figurative painters where that's why they're doing it.
FH: Passing a judgment.

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WF: On the "crap that's out there," this kind of thinking. I'm not comfortable with that at all. If I hear that Francis Alÿs pushed a block of ice around Mexico City until it disappeared, I think that's really neat. I want my work to be infused with a contemporary sensibility that allows me to come at the thing from an angle like that. You don't have to know that I was painting the aurochs from a Nazi zookeeper geneticist point of view, but that's what I'm doing.
FH: So the contemporaneity comes from your attitude?
WF: I would hope that I'm not in opposition to discourses or theories that are more contemporary. It's just that I didn't see any reason why I couldn't use an anachronistic language. It seemed like the right language—it wasn't tapped out in any way for me. I realized I had the facility to create these perfectly credible artifacts just as well as the natural history people I started out admiring, in a demanding tradition. That I could put those demands on myself and meet the criteria. That I could create these objects that almost nobody else could create.
FH: And of course you came along at a time when that was okay again.
WF: *Now* it's okay. When I was starting out there was a lot of suspicion about my work. I met artists who seemed surprised that I was intelligent. They thought they were going to meet a knucklehead who was just hopelessly uncool. It took a while to realize there was something going on in my work. It has something to do with the way you can celebrate underground cartoonists now, or above-ground cartoonists for that matter—comic-book artists like Jack Kirby. That was the stuff I loved—that's what I wanted to be. And the legitimacy of things like tattooing art—there is something about that geeky, comic-book collector thing to what I'm doing. *Juxtapoz* magazine put me on the cover before any mainstream magazine. And now there's a lot of looking back—faux-archaic kind of stuff, like the cover of *The Believer*, which is meant to look like some sort of circus poster. There's a resurgence of a 19th-century eye for certain types of imagery. Didn't Chuck Close do a bunch of daguerreotypes recently?
FH: Yes, there's a huge interest in photography done with archaic processes.
WF: Exactly. And that gave it legitimacy too.
FH: In the back matter of the Taschen book, you talk about how important literary influences have been on you that that's where you start. So there's a visual vocabulary, but also a literary one that's just as important.
WF: Well, the visual vocabulary is literary as well, because it refers to books—natural history books. Watercolors, field notes, special collections in museums and libraries—that's where you see the stuff that looks most like my work. You have to get the gloves on, and the person brings it to you. You get to flip through it, but it doesn't leave the library.
FH: Is there any experience where you've had access to something that just blew your mind?
WF: Yes. Totally. I was very lucky. I made friends with this guy who's an archivist at the Museum of Natural History. I was doing a painting about Carl Akeley, the one of the gorilla holding Carl Akeley's skull [*Sanctuary*, 1998]. It was my Museum of Natural History painting, and I was researching it in the Special Collections. I was coming in and asking if they had any photos of the dead gorillas. He takes out the glass-plate negatives, and then he says, Hey, I've got something for you. And he went away and came back with boxes filled with plaster death masks of the six gorillas that are in the diorama. The masks were done in the field, in 1927. And they still have gorilla fur stuck in the plaster. These are positives, so what they did is make a negative cast, and when they pulled it off the animal's face, some of the fur came away. And then when they put the plaster in the negative and pulled it out they yanked some of the fur back out again. And there are bloody stains on them.

The thing about a gorilla—you've got to imagine. You have to reconstruct his face when you get back to New York. You've skinned his face—so what the heck is left? It's just a piece of leather. You can't tell what he looked like. But they wanted to get it right. You can recognize the gorillas in the Museum of Natural History from the death masks—they are the exact gorillas, down

continued on page 203

to the wrinkles on their noses. The innovation that Akeley came up with in the Museum of Natural History is that you make a sculptural portrait of the animal that you shot, down to the veins and everything. Then you put the skin over it and work it into place with a slow-drying glue. Those aren't couches, they're beautiful sculptures, with all the muscles and tendons in place. That's why they look the way they do; they're incredible. Before Akeley, you made an armature, and you put the skin over it, then you just stuffed it until it was full. You've got no muscles, you've got no veins—you've got no portraiture. One of the ways you can tell they're death masks is that their eyes are open. You can't put plaster on a living animal's eyeball.

So I'm holding these objects that were literally in contact with this thing—and I'd seen a lot of photos of the dead gorillas as well. That blew me away—it was a whole family. A big male, some females, some young.

FH: When you did your Akeley painting, did you use a particular gorilla?

WF: It was Akeley's favorite gorilla—but he's stealing Akeley's skeleton. Akeley killed that gorilla. This is where the work is more complicated than people know. You just look at it and you think, it's a gorilla painting and he's holding a skull. You think it may have something to do with Hamlet or whatever—but it's a portrait of what Akeley called "The Old Man of Mikeno"—Mikeno was the mountain where he was shot. Akeley didn't know how old gorillas could get, but this was an elderly silverback and he thought it must be over 100 years old. They only live to be about 50. But he didn't know—they were new to gorillas. It was 1927, and they barely knew anything about them. They were afraid they were going to be charged and ripped to shreds. They had no idea what the gorillas would do. Akeley was one of the first to observe that they were peaceful animals when not provoked—and big vicious things when they were provoked. He got a pretty good read on their personality just by going up there and shooting them. But he fell in love with this animal—the character of its face.

Sanctuary, *1998, 60½ by 119¾ inches.*

And it's even more complicated than this. There's a picture of Akeley holding that death mask, just gazing at it. He did a bronze bust of that very gorilla that's in the Primate Hall at the Museum of Natural History. But when he brought a second expedition to the same mountains, he died of dysentery and was buried at the spot that's depicted in the diorama. The artists painted the grave of Akeley, in a sense, as a tribute to him. Years later his grave was robbed and the skeleton was stolen—probably in one of the wars that are frequent in that region. The slaughter in Rwanda—some of it happened right at the foot of these volcanoes. Many of the gorillas were killed during those conflicts as well, for food, when things got desperate. People just machine-gunned them.

FH: You've stopped writing so much in your paintings.

WF: I think that, too, was a certain insecurity on my part, and a certain kind of pedantry in my personality. The least successful work is over-explained. These stories are really deep and they're really rich, but it's sometimes better if they're not written all over the piece. I just allow myself to have faith in the image. What I was trying to convey with notes were my efforts at research.

FH: Well it does add to the visual impact—using that archaic script.

WF: There are these Audubon watercolors where he's writing—sometimes really peevishly, to his printer or even to himself—that the legs are actually pink, and white around the eye, please put in a scene that shows a rocky cliff and the seashore. He's in such a hurry that he just gives you the bird specimen. Or a note to James Mason, a young assistant of his, who was doing vegetation in the backgrounds, and it would say, Paint a magnolia branch better than you did the last time. You get indications of his fury to finish this project—his impatience and his stress. These notes are pretty amazing. And I loved that, when I saw the watercolors in the New-York Historical Society with such revealing personal bits. I decided to use that in my own watercolors.

FH: Do your kids enjoy what you do?

WF: Absolutely. My daughter Camelia, who's 10, says, I really like them, they're really big—and they're like storybooks.

FH: At your recent Brooklyn Museum show, you could watch the families. The kids would be really excited and worked up. But you'd also see the parents kind of looking at some of your images, thinking, for instance, Wait, there's a bird sitting on that elephant's erect penis. What do I do about *that*?

WF: I had one kid ask, Why do you paint so many boy animals? And I said, Well I actually paint a lot of girl animals too but you can't tell, like with a bird, unless you know the plumage.

FH: Some of them are so disturbing. When you start to look closely at the passenger pigeons [*Falling Bough*, 2002], for example.

WF: And there's a bull fucking a jaguar—something really crazy [*Chingado*, 1998]. The ones where I'm in the head of a delirious Audubon, or a delirious Akeley, those are the most disturbing. Those are the ones where our cultural assumptions about animals start to give way. They start to be frightening Freudian visions.

FH: It's not a sentimentalizing view of an animal.

WF: Yeah—I don't care so much about the animal. I care about the way we think about animals. □

Walton Ford's most recent show was on view at Paul Kasmin Gallery, New York, May 8-July 3, 2008. His midcareer retrospective, "Tigers of Wrath," was organized by the Brooklyn Museum, where it was on view Nov. 3, 2006-Jan. 28, 2007. It traveled in 2007 to the Norton Museum of Art, West Palm Beach, and the San Antonio Museum of Art. A large-format book surveying Ford's watercolors, Pancha Tantra *(2007), was released by Taschen in spring 2008.*

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The New York Times

ART IN REVIEW

Tigers of Wrath Watercolors by Walton Ford

BENJAMIN GENOCCHIO
NOVEMBER 24, 2006

Gibe at Richard Burton, explorer: “His Chaplain,” by Mr. Ford.

With his prodigious skills as an illustrator, the naturalist artist Walton Ford has, over a relatively short time, produced a remarkable, at times repetitious but deeply reflective group of works on themes like colonialism, the tradition of naturalist illustration and the existence of animal species.

The present show assembles more than 50 of his large-scale watercolors of birds, animals, snakes and lushly exotic flora, all produced since the early 1990s. Combining pathos and wit, artifice and honesty, they frequently depict moments in which a wild animal encounters human culture, often to its detriment.

Sometimes the threat is overt, as in pictures of animals and birds roped or wounded; in other images you merely sense that some horrible violence has occurred, or is about to happen. In "Thanh Hoang" (1997), a tiger has burst his bonds of captivity and is seen fleeing away into the forest, his tail flesh grazed and exposed and surrounded by buzzing flies. In "November 1864" (2005), an immense, angry-looking wild boar roars as its habitat burns.

What big teeth you have, crocodile: deceptive animal harmony in "Buddha Purnima" (1998) by Walton Ford.

Though wonderfully lucid and dramatic, the moralizing of these images can become a little tedious, as in "Dirty Dick Burton's Aide de Camp" (2002), in which a monkey represents Richard Burton, the 19th-century explorer, who apparently kept primates in his house in an effort to learn their language. The illustrator John James Audubon also comes in for some censure, for his practice of trapping and killing animals to study them; in one image he lies fallen in the snow as a golden eagle flies away, a trap still attached to its leg.

But bashing old-school naturalists and scientists is not the only -- or chief -- preoccupation of this popular, prolific artist. He also imparts an environmental message, couched in terms of a lament for the irreversible loss when a sense of morality does not govern the treatment of animals.

Art in America

Walton Ford at Paul Kasmin

MICHAËL AMY

OCTOBER 2005

NEW YORK

Walton Ford at Paul Kasmin

Walton Ford specializes in the depiction of extinct or endangered animals. His particular interest in birds, his meticulous draftsmanship and his preferred medium of watercolor, ink and gouache on paper bring to mind the work of John James Audubon—an artist Ford has been infatuated with since his youth. Ford obtains the ideas for his paintings and prints, which always have a hint of the surreal, from published accounts and pre-existing images in early nature books. His animals, though lifelike, seem imbued with the psychology of humans, as his works touch upon the confrontation between culture and nature, order and chaos.

Le Jardin (2005) is a 16-foot-wide horizontal triptych composed of vertical sheets. Inspired by a 19th-century sketch by the painter George Catlin, it shows a monumental bison panting at the center foreground, blood dripping from its tongue, encircled by a horde of white wolves. The bison has evidently attacked one of the wolves, which lies nearby, supine and mortally injured. This scene from the American West achieves an aura of mystery by being transposed to a formal European garden, with immaculately cut lawns and geometrically shaped evergreens in the distance. It takes place on a raised terrace, giving the episode a theatrical effect that is heightened by the low horizon line, magnifying the animals' scale. Here, as elsewhere, Ford stains the margins of the sheets to give them an aged appearance, as if these were the recovered works of an 18th- or 19th-century naturalist whose persona he has adopted. His realist style and careful craftsmanship indeed hark back to that earlier age; in this historical turn, Ford demonstrates an affinity to slightly reactionary contemporaries such as John Currin and Alexis Rockman, the latter himself an *animalier*.

The source for *Delirium* (2004) is Audubon's description of the capture of a golden eagle. Attempting to kill the trapped creature, Audubon tried to smoke it to death. In this work, filled with vigorous movement, the eagle rises with its wings spread across the width of the sheet, exhaling smoke as it drags a metal trap clamped to its talon and tied to a broken branch. A tiny figure—apparently Audubon—has passed out on the snow in the bottom left corner. Suggesting the struggle between nature and man's will to dominate it, the painting depicts an episode in which nature has briefly triumphed.

The exhibition also included six large, six-color etchings with aquatint and drypoint, the labor-intensive result of seven years' work. They focus on the realm of birds and were meant to evoke the scale of Audubon's *Birds of America*. Ford is painfully aware of the fact that the natural environment known to Audubon has taken a turn for the worse. Fashioning scenes of cruelty and violence with a degree of irony, Ford avoids romanticizing his subjects even as he evokes the wondrous creatures we are slowly wiping out. —*Michaël Amy*

Walton Ford: *Delirium*, 2004, watercolor, gouache, ink and pencil on paper, 59 ⅝ by 40¼ inches; at Paul Kasmin.

THE NEW YORKER

Galleries – Chelsea

WALTON FORD

JUNE 4, 2005

GALLERIES–CHELSEA

WALTON FORD

The dreams of pioneering naturalists inspire Ford's persnickety but majestic watercolors. Leonardo da Vinci's famous vision of being attacked, or succored, by a hawk as he lay in his cradle and John James Audubon's nightmarish memory of a golden eagle fighting a trap are rendered by Ford as parables of menace and nostalgia. The centerpiece is a monumental triptych based on an anecdote from George Catlin, in which a buffalo—incongruously standing in a manicured formal garden—fends off a pack of bloody wolves clad in fluffy white wool like sheep. Through July 1. (Kasmin, 293 Tenth Ave. 212-563-4474.)

The New York Times

A Naturalist Painter Evokes Legends of the Past

JAMES PROSEK
JANUARY 10, 2005

A Naturalist Painter Evokes Legends of the Past

"Hi, this is a message for Walton Ford," the voice on the answering machine began. "My name is Anthony, from Santa Barbara, and I have an egg" — pause — "of the extinct elephant bird, *aepyornis titan*. I don't know if this would interest you."

The man left his number and hung up.

After replaying the message in his studio, Ford said: "I'm not quite sure how I came to be the recipient of oddball naturalists. And what did he want? To give me the egg?"

Walton Ford is a painter first and foremost, not a collector of natural curiosities. But his giant watercolors, often lamentations for an abundant nature past, seem to draw fans from a group outside the art world that identify with his colorful vision.

Had Ford come of age as an American painter in the 19th century, his love of drawing nature would most likely have led to a career as a larger-than-life naturalist frontiersman like Constantine Rafinesque or John James Audubon.

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But by the time Ford was born, in 1960, the closest he would come to experiencing the American wilderness was in dioramas at the Museum of Natural History in New York. Many of the magnificent birds that Audubon described had already been diminished by the effects of civilization and the industrial revolution. Some species — the passenger pigeon, the Carolina parakeet and the ivory-billed woodpecker — had disappeared, while introduced species like the European starling and the house sparrow had displaced indigenous birds throughout their native range.

In his youth, Ford drew birds and fish, influenced by his older brother Flick and his father Flickie, an avid trout fisherman. He also copied Audubon. Audubon's work in particular engaged Ford as a child because the birds looked so human. Each painting was theater on a tree branch — an argument over food, a marital spat, a battle against a nosy snake — that blurred the thin line between nature and man. Like Audubon's work, Ford's pictures of animals became weirdly anthropomorphic.

James Prosek

Walton Ford in his studio in Great Barrington, Mass. Next year at the Brooklyn Museum, he will have the first major retrospective of his works.

Comparisons to Constantine Rafinesque and John James Audubon.

Ford continued to draw and paint his way to the Rhode Island School of Design, where he tried his hand at comic scenes of 19th century American life. These pictures mimicked primitive American oil paintings and seemed to long for an early and wilder America. Other paintings had humans engaged with nature, acknowledging a relationship that was becoming increasingly uncertain. One painting showed a boy on a dock with a live eel in his hand. By the look on his face, the boy is puzzled as to whether he should smash it on the dock or use it to scare someone nearby. You get the feeling that the boy holding the eel is Ford, unsure of what to do with the power of nature in his hands.

But Ford could not help coming back, again and again to his Audubon-like love of birds and mammals. He had tried to conceal the impulse as an art student for fear he would be labeled a wildlife painter. As his work matured, however, he found ways to incorporate his forest friends, to use them, as Bosch or Durer had, as players in his sociopolitical commentaries.

Ford's paintings take their inspiration not directly from nature, but from literature, or previous depictions of nature in paint. One shows a giant tree branch snapping under the weight of thousands of passenger pigeons; another depicts the effects of colonialism in Mexico — a large white domesticated bull raping a leopard, while the leopard has a fatal grip on the bull's neck. The pictures are vivid, colorful and large, two dimensional dioramas. A Ford exhibition is like a storybook in which animals have inherited the earth.

I wanted to meet Ford, perhaps for the same reason that the man in Santa Barbara wanted to offer him the egg of an extinct bird: he had spoken to me through his work. In late August, I visited his studio in Great Barrington, Mass. He greeted me at the nondescript door in a forgotten part of town near the railroad tracks. His space was filled with drawings, books on parrots, maps, feathers and the death mask of a gorilla. Ford was animated, like one of his animals, lit up, a nervous fountain of ideas.

Later, we took a hike on trails at the tricorner of Connecticut, New York and Massachusetts. Ford raced up to the top of Brace Mountain like a goat. Did he take inspiration for his work directly from nature?

"No," he said. "If you're in nature, most of the time nothing really happens. Only once in a great while have I seen anything that warrants a narrative painting. On Great Pond in Maine, I saw an osprey attacking a great blue heron. That was cool. But no, I get up every morning thinking of Bodmer and Lear."

"The formative thing was the Museum of Natural History as a kid," Ford said. "Looking into the dioramas and feeling like I was in there. They almost break my heart how beautiful they are, the longing of wanting to be there. The places that are gone, the animals that are extinct."

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At the top of Brace Mountain, Ford took a deep breath and looked over the valley, the tips of the leaves already showing a hint of autumnal change.

"How do you make that pictorial innovation or intellectual leap that changes the way people look at the world?" I said.

He shrugged, then spotted a bird. "Wow," he said pointing, "a sharp-shinned hawk."

Time may show that Ford has already taken that leap. His first major retrospective will be at the Brooklyn Museum in 2006.

The New York Times

Not Only Watching, Painting and Sculpting, Too

BENJAMIN GENOCCHIO
FEBRUARY 14, 2004

ART REVIEW

Not Only Watching, Painting and Sculpting, Too

By BENJAMIN GENOCCHIO

MOST of the artists in "For the Birds," the new exhibition at Artspace, in New Haven, are birdwatchers. This makes sense because the show samples artists who make art about birds.

Denise Markonish, the curator, and herself a bird watcher, or birder, as they are known, decided to put together the exhibition after noticing that so many artists use birds in their art. She seems to have had no trouble finding 32 artists, from the United States, Canada and England, whose work fits the theme.

Admired by artists for their color, beauty and grace, birds are a time-honored detail in paintings. Flight, and the freedom it represents, also made them popular symbols in religious art. But outside ornithological studies, and scientific illustrations, few works of Western art have birds as their central subject.

Eastern art traditions are another matter. Here, birds have a far broader symbolic function, and have long been the subject of major artworks. For instance, the crane in Chinese painting is one of many symbols for longevity, while in Indian, and early Greek, art the owl was often used as a symbol for wisdom.

"For The Birds" is a chirping aviary of an exhibition. On view are symbolic birds, abstract birds, kitsch birds, sculptured birds, birds on video, birds made from trash, bird paintings and, yes, even real birds stuffed, then used to make art. Frankly, there are more birds here than you can poke a stick at.

First prize for the weirdest inclusion goes to Karl Unnasch, who uses bird roadkill and model railroad accessories to create bizarre, surrealistic landscapes. A fairly close second is Natalie Jeremijenko, who has cobbled together some kind of mechanical goose that evidently makes sounds and flaps about when plugged into the wall. It was not working when I visited the show.

Many of the exhibits are decorative and cute. In this category are Kathleen Bitetti's bird sculptures, Kathryn Spence's wispy chicks made from bits of wire, lint, thread, string and other materials, and a slew of paintings of real and imaginary birds by, among others, Walton Ford, John Newsom, Ann Craven, Gail Boyajian, Daniel Dueck, Meryl Blinder and Amy Ross.

Among the paintings, "Dear Traveler" (2004), by Chris Mir, a young New Haven artist, stands out for its compositional flair. Mr. Mir creates fairy-tale landscapes populated with imagery pulled from magazines and the mass media. They are all about the sampling of images as a metaphor for life's choices. If that seems a little deep, just soak up the color.

Other works have a bit more meat behind them, like Walton Ford's "Swadeshi-cide" (1998). Mr. Ford has long been fascinated with the drawings of birds and other animals by the American naturalist artist John James Audubon. Although Mr. Ford's works often take their visual cues from Audubon, their message is bound up with current social, political and ecological issues.

"Swadeshi-cide" is a nine-color etching with aquatint, drypoint and hand coloring. It shows in meticulous and colorful detail a hornbill gazing into a nest of starlings and parakeets. Although the meaning of this image is vague, the use in the title of the word "Swadeshi," a popular Indian expression for "made in India," suggests that the piece is a commentary on the displacement of native birds, like the hornbill, by imported ones.

Mining a similar theme is Rachel Berwick's sculptural installation, "A Vanishing; Martha" (2003), consisting of an upturned bell jar containing a cast amber sculpture of a passenger pigeon. Running around the rim of the jar is the story of the last passenger pigeon, Martha, which died in a Cincinnati zoo in 1914. For no reason, this once plentiful species was hunted to extinction.

Ecological messages also underpin Mark Dion's "Habitat Group" (2004), a tableaux vivant consisting of a bunch of plastic bird decoys and outdoor roughage covered in tar to simulate the effects of an oil spillage. The toxic smell, and the dense, treacle-like consistency of the black sludge, is repulsive. Which brings me to a nagging thought: Does anybody buy this kind of art?

Fred Tomaselli's paper collages are eminently collectable. For "Passerines White Eyes" (2003), the artist cut images of birds from a field guide and then replaced their plumage with imagery of down jackets cut from fashion advertisements. Despite a priggish didacticism, the work has much that is appealing, not least of which is its vibrant color.

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"For the Birds" is at Artspace, 50 Orange Street, New Haven, through March 20. Information: (203) 772-2709.

ARTFORUM

Walton Ford

Paul Kasmin

MARTHA SCHWENDENER
JANUARY 2003

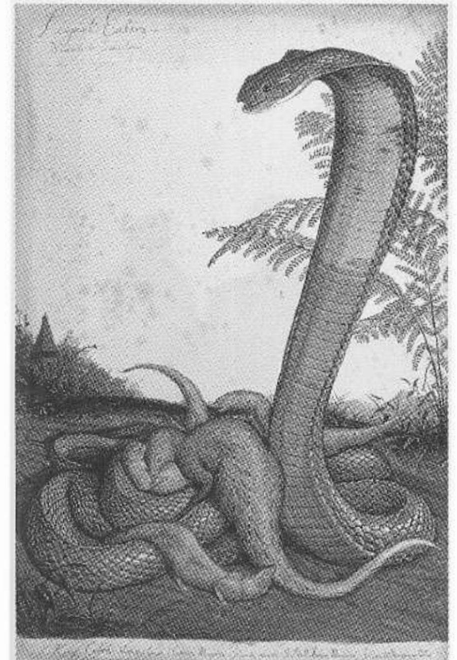
WALTON FORD
PAUL KASMIN

Walton Ford regularly offers a web of images and text exhuming whole realms of history: the history of natural science and zoology; exploration (and its attendant exploitation) and colonization; the history of images, artistic and otherwise; even the history of history. Remarkably, he accomplishes this feat in watercolor, one of the more lightweight mediums in the lexicon of modern and contemporary painting.

This show featured eight of Ford's medium-size and large paintings that at first seem to mimic Audubon prints and their ancestors, which hark back to scientific illustrations and plein air topographical drawings of landscapes and seaports. *The Starling*, 2002, for instance, features a huge, carefully rendered bird perched on a branch. Surrounding the starling are other birds, smaller in scale, which bear prey in their beaks. Under the entire group, Ford painted in careful script the Latin name for each bird (e.g., *Sturnus vulgaris* for the starling). The strange underpinnings of these works became clear as one walked through the gallery. *Dirty Dick Burton's Aide de Camp*, 2002, depicts a primate—the common langoor (*Presbytis entellus*)—standing in an abandoned nineteenth-century-style camp (somewhere in the "Orient") clutching a hookah, the "Dick" Burton referenced actually Sir Richard Burton, a "gentleman-naturalist" who once invited forty monkeys to his dinner table so he could learn their language. *Space Monkey*, 2001, verges on the bestial-pornographic: A female monkey with bright pink genitalia appears mounting her mate's waiting erection, while a caption overhead reads PATTI SMITH GROUP—*EASTER*—TRACK #2. As in all his works, Ford references the world of naturalism (populated in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries with rich white men who scoured the globe for "specimens"). But he also pulls out a gritty Patti Smith quote in which she is accosted by a "Space Monkey UFO" and removed from her environment—a little like the animals relocated from *their* jungles to the Museum of Natural History, one of Ford's favorite haunts. More heavy-handed was *Madagascar*, 2002, a rendering of an elephant bird (*Aepyornis maximus*) bound with rope being led down a sand dune toward a "tall" ship anchored in a shallow harbor. Tiny images of people tied together being led toward the ship bolster the idea of conquest, along with a quote by Etienne de Flacourt, French governor of Madagascar (he was installed by the French East India Company in 1648), describing his "objective" impressions.

Ford's work has more than a whiff of the eccentric. Working in the non-"serious" medium of the Sunday painter, Ford nevertheless tries to reinsert his paintings into history. Like a forger, he gets the look of the past by "aging" his work, using watercolors to create yellowing edges and water spots. But he doesn't try to crawl back in time. Unlike McDermott & McGough, who attempt to re-create the past, Ford collapses the past into the present, offering images that are both new and old—summoning an Audubon stiffness while consciously tweaking that convention—and mining subjects pertinent to contemporary environmentalism and geopolitics. Ford's penchant for animals and the nature/culture nexus also calls to mind artists covering similar territory: Ann Craven, Ashley Bickerton, Mark Dion, and Alexis Rockman. Most of these, however, use animals as stand-ins for humans. The same might be said of Ford—but why make the distinction between nature and culture? Ford splendidly shows how the two histories are entwined and how the treatment of animals and the extinction of various species serves as an analog—and possibly warning—for our own.

—*Martha Schwendener*



Walton Ford, *Serpent Eaters*, 2002, watercolor, gouache, ink, and pencil on paper, 59½ x 40".

The New York Times

Walton Ford

GRACE GLUECK
NOVEMBER 8, 2002

Walton Ford

Paul Kasmin Gallery
293 10th Avenue, at 27th Street
Chelsea
Through Nov. 16

Although Audubon is the inspiration for Walton Ford's supersize watercolors of alarming birds and animals, the earlier naturalist would probably be dismayed by them. They are far more sinister than Audubon's creatures; there is narrative to them, and they sometimes display parts of their anatomies that Audubon would blush to take his brush to.

Apart from all that, they are theatrical characters, magnificently rendered, tricked out with arcane references and done from a satirical-allegorical stance that seems to point to a moral. In one hair-raising scene, a heavy tree bough overloaded with passenger pigeons (now extinct) breaks under their weight, plunging down with a seething mass of the birds as they feed, fight, fornicate and lose fledglings from their nests. Aesop would have loved it.

In another garish drama, a gross, greedy starling perched on a tree branch opens its mouth to ingest a toucan that is surrounded by a bevy of small avian onlookers. Other fauna are not neglected. A cobra is beset by mongooses that gnaw at its coils; an out-of-context panther slinks across a snowy plain pursued by torch-bearing villagers; an ape with a hookah and manuscript papers appears as the aide-de-camp to a 19th-century explorer.

This is truly a one-of-a-kind show. As creator and keeper of this fantastic menagerie, Mr. Ford is that thing frowned on by word hawks: unique. *GRACE GLUECK*

Art in America

Walton Ford at Paul Kasmin

EDWARD LEFFINGWELL
JANUARY 2001

Walton Ford at Paul Kasmin

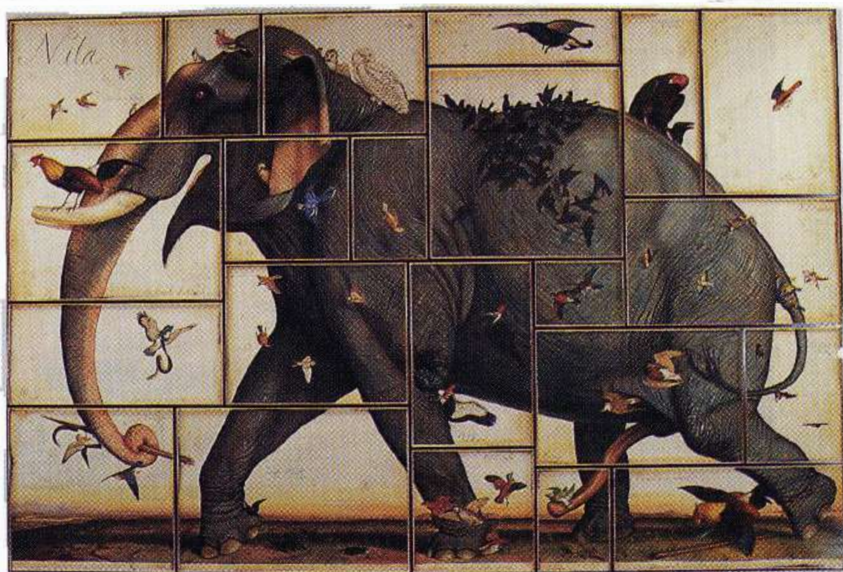
With the long labor and grace of his annotated process, Walton Ford pictures a world at the moment of its collapse, "a wounded Civilization in an Area of darkness," as he observes in the complex field notes that mark the monumental work on paper, *Nila* (1999-2000). Ford's largest painting to date, this vast study in watercolor, gouache, ink and pencil represents a domesticated Indian bull elephant in the evident throes of sexual arousal, grasping a mahout's broken goad in its trunk. Of a species native to the subcontinent, the elephant is attended by a riot of birds associated with the West, each seeking the "nila" of the title, the pressure points that cause a trained elephant to respond on command, to raise a foot, to stop and go, to kill. The birds are the gadflies of Empire, the elephant is the India that endures.

Made up of 22 framed leaves organized as a 12-by-18-foot rectangle, the painting has the flattened perspective and sense of contrivance of a 19th-century zoological study, with an accumulation of brushstrokes to render feathers, hide or pelt, and the paper foxed and patinated by the artist. Ford lists the birds as though the painting were a mammoth assembly for a field guide. He identifies nightingale, goldfinch, turkey, jay, vulture, various sorts of owls, a mass of European starlings swarming on the elephant's back. Each bird is emblematic of figures associated with the pursuit of Orientalism, both detractors and those in its thrall, from missionaries and imperialists to the V.S. Naipauls and George Harrisons of today. All this is suggested by a scattering of clues—text fragments that reckon the effects of exploitation and cultural voyeurism.

Ford showed three additional watercolors, generously scaled at 5 by 10 feet, representing a bison of the Caucasus and a North African lion (both extinct species), plus a group of orangutans fleeing a forest fire. In his allegory *Kavkazets* (2000), the bison, embers smoldering in its shaggy hide, represents the embattled people of the endlessly scorched earth of the Caucasus. The black-caped lion of *Cabin Boy to Barbary* (2000) stands over the body of Delacroix, his kit and illustrated notebooks scattered in the rampage. In *Fallen Mias* (2000), a mature orangutan brandishes a Nikon by the telephoto lens while leading its group and a resident primatologist from the burning rain forest.

Rich with interest and meaning, addressing the exploitation of culture as well as the majesty of wilderness and its loss, each painting invites the viewer to take up an idea and follow where eye and imagination will lead, into the far distances of the remarkable works. These are troubling allegorical schemata of subjects ennobled in the face of annihilation.

—Edward Leffingwell



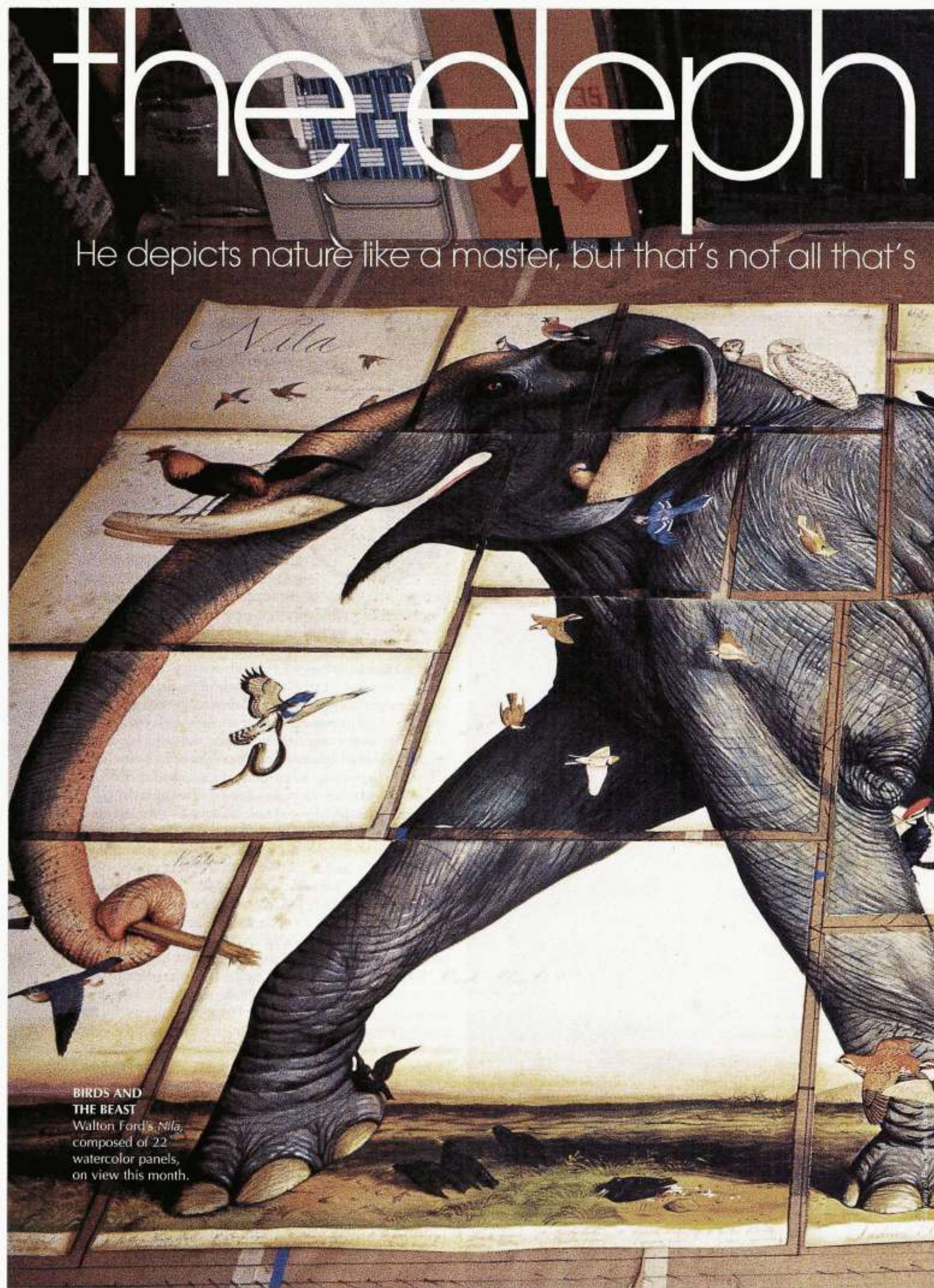
Walton Ford: *Nila*, 1999-2000, watercolor, gouache, ink and pencil on paper, 12 by 18 feet; at Paul Kasmin.

VOGUE

The Elephant Man

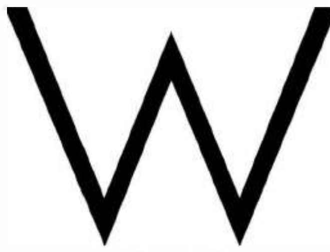
He depicts nature like a master, but that's not all that's going on in Walton Ford's work.

DODIE KAZANJIAN
MAY 2000



BIRDS AND THE BEAST
Walton Ford's *Nila*, composed of 22 watercolor panels, on view this month.

ant man
going on in Walton Ford's work, finds Dodie Kazanjian
MIKE KELLEY



alton Ford is giving birth to an elephant. The huge beast, eighteen feet long by twelve feet high, is laid out on the floor of his studio in Great Barrington, Massachusetts, in 22 separate watercolor drawings that fit together like a gigantic puzzle. It is an Indian elephant in full stride, with clouds of brilliant birds attending its progress in allegorical flights of fancy. As in all of Ford's paintings, the details are rendered with a brio and naturalistic precision that seem to be at odds with the strangeness of the image. I've been trying to see it for weeks. Snowstorms have made me postpone two earlier trips. Now it's nearly finished, and it's by far the largest picture Ford has done to date. And I'm embarrassed to say that I can't stop looking at the colossal pachydermatous organ, fully extended and ready for action. On its tip, a little green Indian parrot appears to be raping a blue-gray shrike, in the missionary position, no less. Welcome to the weird and wonderful world of Walton Ford.

The elephant goes on view at the Paul Kasmin Gallery in Manhattan this month, where it is sure to astound the natives. Ford's very peculiar style—think John James Audubon crossed with Hieronymus Bosch—has yielded fantastic menageries of birds and beasts, including last season's dying camel, and he's been working on his elephant for nine months. "It's the ultimate creature to paint," he says, all rapid-fire enthusiasm, "the ultimate land creature, at least. This is a top-of-the-line elephant, one that would be worth a hell of a lot of money on the elephant market. You want their trunk and penis and tail to damn near touch the ground. A very fine elephant."

> His work can be enjoyed on many levels, but the entry level is dazzling draftsmanship and sheer pleasure

Just turning 40, Ford is a ruggedly male character in a navy ski hat and a cobalt-blue warm-up jacket. Ebullient, talkative, supremely confident, and slightly manic, he seems delighted to have a visitor in his wildly cluttered, rather chilly studio, which is in a turn-of-the century lumberyard in this semi-sophisticated Berkshire town. A self-proclaimed "late bloomer," he has only recently started to gain a following in the New York art world. "His paintings are like visions," says Marcia Tucker, founding director of the New Museum, who gave Ford his first museum exposure in 1987. "They're very, very specific—detailed and with meaning. They have real significance, but the significance is not readily apparent. They have this strange quality of being caught right between daily life and hallucination." The Whitney Museum has just bought a complete set of his new exotic bird prints—a series of six, of which only two have been issued so far. The dealer Irving Blum and several other astute collectors have become ardent buyers of his large- and small-scale watercolors. After subsisting on grants and odd jobs until fairly recently, Ford can now concentrate exclusively on his painting, and on the good life with his wife, Julie Jones Ford, and their two young daughters, Lillian and Camellia.

He brings out a diagram showing the 85 pressure points or nerve centers (called *nila*) on an elephant, which the mahout can prod with his sharp-pointed ankus to make the beast do what he wants. Ford, who spent six months in India in 1994–95, does a great deal of research on all of his subjects. His paintings are far more complex than the perfectly realized natural-history studies they appear to be at first glance. Each contains a narrative, or narratives within narratives, replete with social and political messages that usually have to do with the baleful effects of Western domination over nature or older, Third World cultures. "My elephant has got all these metaphors in it," he says. The birds hovering around or perching on him are mostly Western birds, and they're trying to manipulate his nila. "The owls are the scholars, and they're sitting up on the points that benumb, on the back of his neck. The goldfinches are like Peace Corps workers; they're trying to plant flowers in the rear end because it smells. One of them is over here pressing on the point that makes the elephant stop, and another is working on the point that makes him go. They're trying to help, but they're screwing everything up. The vultures and crows are people like Naipaul, the naysayers who write books predicting doom for India and Asia. But this elephant is pretty much out of control, and in a beautiful way. My idea is that the elephant is like India. He's been domesticated. His tusks have been sawed to make him safer. But for 50 years now he's been free. This elephant is loose; he can do stuff; he's feeling his oats. This is an elephant in musth. When they go into musth, they get this erection, and they're extremely dangerous. You can't drive them; you can't control them. India feels powerful now. It's got a big computer industry. It's got the bomb. This is an elephant that's broken free."

Ford goes on for quite a while about his metaphors. He talks about a flock of starlings that clusters on the elephant's back and explains that the European Starling is a bird that has spread to North America and other continents, often driving out native species. But this starling has not really taken over in India; it is, Ford says, "usually a symbol of me or someone like me, an outsider, missing the point and not understanding what the hell's going on." Other birds do what their names suggest: The quail are quailing, frightened; the grouse are grousing; the larks are on a lark. Do we need to know all this stuff to appreciate the painting? Well, yes and no. "I want the viewer to break the code," he says. "But I also want to make it as cryptic as possible. I like in each piece to figure out a complicated personal narrative and then lose it a little bit. Get away from it. The more I pin it down, the less interesting it gets. I'm always striving to come up with something that communicates but does it in the way that *Alice in Wonderland* does." In other words, there's a lot more here than meets the eye. A Walton Ford painting can be enjoyed on many levels, but it just so happens that the entry level is dazzling draftsmanship and sheer, knockout visual pleasure.

Ford has had a love-hate relationship with Audubon ever since he began copying his prints at the age of five. The house in Larchmont, New York, where Ford grew up had a book

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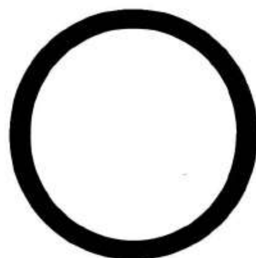
of Audubon prints. It went with the family territory of hunting-and-fishing Southern gentlemen, from which Walton's father had defected after graduating from Vanderbilt and coming north in the fifties to work for Time Inc. Walton soon found that he could draw his own birds as accurately as Audubon. "There are drawings of birds that I did when I was five, six, and seven that are completely legit," he tells me. He drew for hours at a time, nearly every day. Eventually he reached the conclusion that Audubon (a copy of whose four-volume *Birds of America* sold at Christie's in March for a record $8.8 million) "never got past the basics. He had no talent, no natural ability, or almost none. You can get to Audubon's level just by hard work."

Later, Ford read Audubon's journals, which made him realize that this celebrated naturalist was in fact a ruthless and somewhat unbalanced slaughterer of animals. "He was over-the-top in his celebration of the blood sports," according to Ford. "He took much more of an NRA approach than an Audubon Society approach. People who say he shot only animals that he wanted to draw—that's complete bullshit. A lot of his scientific descriptions of animals are how they face being killed, whether they're brave or not. It's a sportsman's take on it. And what's great is he tells you how they all taste. An owl tastes disgusting and oily, for example. My family on both sides came from plantations in the South, and they were all slave owners. My father's ancestors, the Donelsons, settled in Nashville. One of my mother's ancestors was a governor of Georgia named Cobb, who turns up in Ken Burns's *Civil War* documentary as a racist villain. So someone like Audubon is very attractive to me. I'd rather my heroes were kind of half creeps, because that's what life is really like."



n a recent trip to New York, Walton meets me for lunch at Arqua, in Tribeca. He's there first, reading a book on European attitudes toward Indian art called *Much Maligned Monsters*, by Partha Mitter. "You should have told me this place was right across the street from the Baby Doll Lounge," he jokes. "I know it intimately." This leads to a discussion of how he met his wife, Julie Jones, a beautiful and soft-spoken woman with waist-length brown braids. (She had dropped by his studio with two-year-old Camellia when I was there.) Julie is an artist who has put her career on hold until both kids are in school. "I saw her drawings before I saw her," he tells me. This was when they were both eighteen years old and freshmen at the Rhode Island School of Design. "Her charcoal figure drawings really were amazing, and then I saw her, and she's this exquisite creature. It's like a tragedy. I thought I was going to be a James Bond guy for a while. But there she was. I was a goner. We got married when we were 25."

"To me, they looked all-American, almost out of *American Gothic*," says the novelist Jeffrey Eugenides, a close friend who was at Brown at the time. "Julie Jones and Walton Ford are in-the-American-grain names, and their faces are that way, too—both so fresh and decent-looking. She is. I don't know about him."

Walton was majoring in film. "I was a terrible filmmaker," he says, "but I had stories to tell. Narrative was the thing that was bugging me, and film seemed to be really important then. To me, *Aguirre, the Wrath of God* was the best movie and an even bigger influence than rock music. With its great visual metaphors, it's beyond anything that you can paint." He loved Robert Altman's *McCabe & Mrs. Miller* and David Lynch's *Eraserhead* and Fellini's *Satyricon*. He made friends with literature students at Brown, including Eugenides (the film of his novel, *The Virgin Suicides*, recently opened), whom he credits with inspiring him to read current fiction. "But I ended up wanting to do it with painting. I wanted something I could get my hands on right away. I made fake Audubons that looked completely legitimate and sent them forward in time."

Julie Jones Ford, with Lillian, in Khajuraho, India, in 1995 during the family's six-month stay.

"I was interested in the clash of cultures, the constant cultural misunderstandings that result in a place like India"

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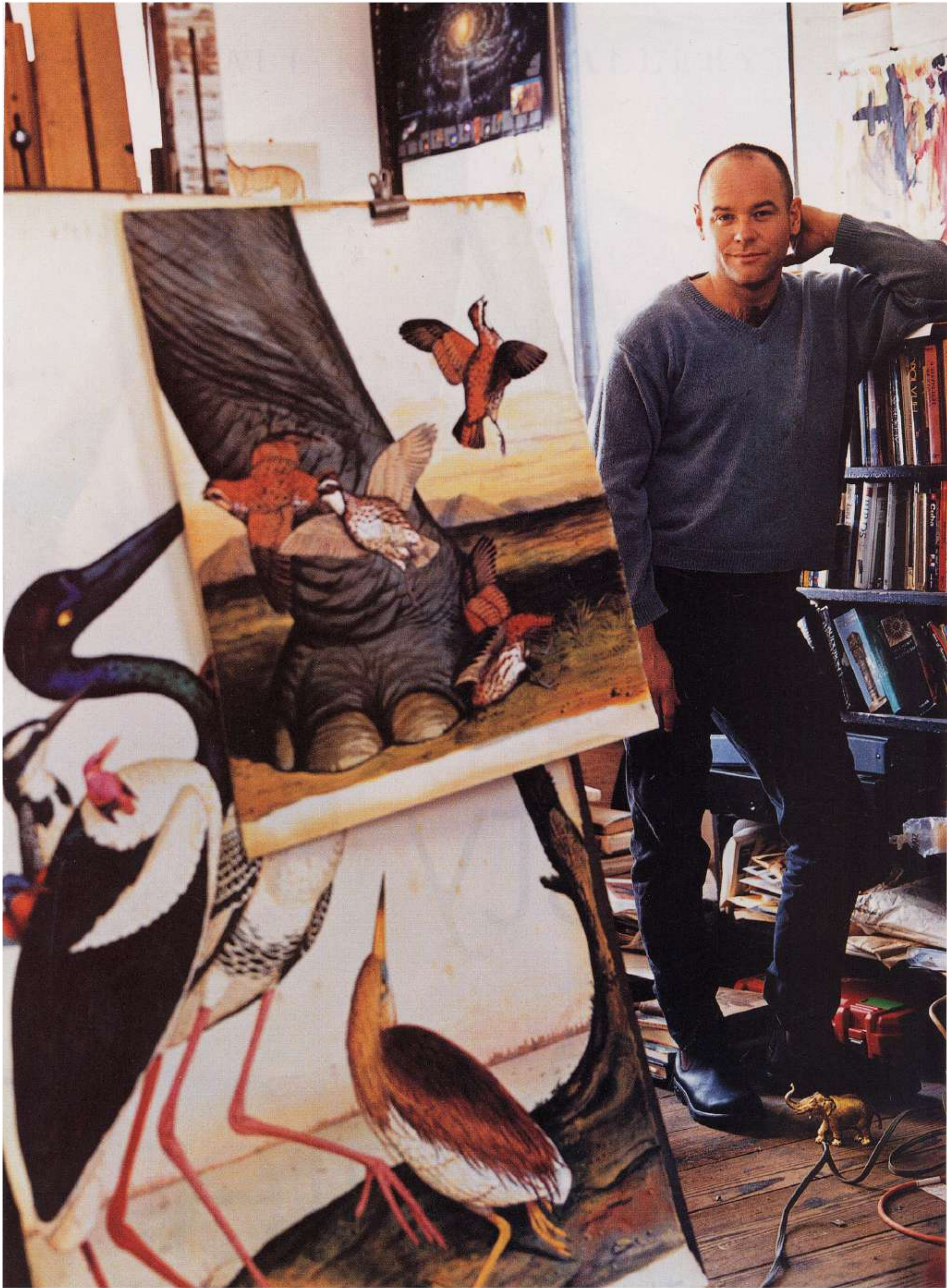

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Figurative painting was cropping up in the work of David Salle, Eric Fischl, Donald Sultan, and other young New York artists in the eighties, but when Ford tried to interest galleries in his brand of hallucinatory realism, it seemed out of step. "I took a long time to find my way. I was completely amazed by artists who hit the ground running." This was the period of odd jobs and foundation grants. But it was Julie's Fulbright in 1994 that took them to India for six months, and that proved to be a turning point. "Julie was interested in the history and art of India. I was interested in the clash of cultures, the constant cultural misunderstandings that result in a place like that. It seemed to fit perfectly with what I was interested in before, which was the conquest of this country by people like my ancestors. When I saw lepers, and dogs eating corpses by the side of the river, I thought to myself, I'm finally seeing the real show, the human condition. We live in a country club here. I had serious culture shock when I got back. India made New York City look like a Swiss village, so neat and tidy. Places like Dean & DeLuca completely freaked me out when I got off the plane. I'd love to do what [Francesco] Clemente does and split my time between India and New York. Just for that reality check."

For the time being, though, Ford is happy enough living in the Berkshires. "Great Barrington is one of those main-drag towns like you have out West," he says. The Berkshire Coffee Roasting Company, where he goes for his coffee twice a day, is just down the street from his studio. The record store is a little farther down the block. He likes his rock music loud; sometimes he goes to the store and asks a local teenager to pick out a new CD for him. "I'm in the studio by myself all day, standing there painting feather detail for twelve hours at a time. Sometimes I'll work right through dinner, then eat in town and go home late." (He might also put down a few at the Union Bar & Grill with his drinking buddies, Will and Dan.) Home is in Hillsdale, ten miles away. "I'm a recluse up there," he says. "I take my girls skiing on weekends, and in the summer we swim in the Green River. It's pretty wholesome stuff."

Ford goes on for quite a while about his metaphors. The starling "is usually a symbol of someone like me, an outsider, missing the point, not understanding what the hell's going on"

Not many successful artists today spend twelve hours painting feather detail. I ask him how he's managed to hew so unerringly to his realist course. He agrees it hasn't been easy. "There's so much bad realist painting around, excruciatingly bad, that you can be a little suspect when you first hit the scene. It's rare that you find an angle where this stuff is even the slightest bit interesting. But when someone does come along with just one idea, and can paint and draw, people are generally excited. I've been drawing since I was five years old. By the time I was 20, I could do it on a very high level. There's a certain point when your struggle aspect is over, and drawing becomes interpretation. In my animals, for example, I deliberately flatten them out and mess up some stuff to make them look more like nineteenth-century work. You could paint like a photograph if you feel like it, but you're trying to get some sort of weird interpretation. It comes like music, where you're past the point of trying to sing the scales, and you're into interpreting a piece of music or making it your own. This is how Marian Anderson sings. She's past the basics."

I ask him about David Hockney's new theory that the old masters used lenses to help them draw. "Hockney is a brilliant artist and a brilliant guy, but honest to God, I think he's way off there. I have some inkling of the feeling of authority that you can get when you're drawing at the top of your form. It doesn't have to do with tricks. It has to do with the amount of training. I'm convinced that Ingres and Holbein and those guys had the goods to draw those things without lenses."

"Have you ever used a lens?"

"No!" (He seems insulted by the question.) "I don't want to blow my own horn, but I've got the goods. Give me a napkin. I'll draw you a lute right now. I don't even need the thing in front of me. I know the geometry."

Ford has narratives floating around in his head about bison, dolphins, orangutans, and werewolves, some of which may materialize in time for his new show. "I just read *The Wreck of the Whaleship Essex*, the firsthand account that inspired Melville to write *Moby-Dick*. I'd really love to paint a 60-foot sperm whale, life-size." For his next show after this one, he might even paint human beings. "I love thinking about Sir Richard Burton, this character who translated the Kama Sutra and was an expert in Oriental erotica. He also penetrated Mecca in disguise, and he was a kind of sexual tourist who fucked his way around the world. I want to paint him having sex and covered with birds."

At the moment, though, Ford is still wrestling with his elephant. He's finished the drawing and has spent hours abusing the paper to make it look "foxed"—spotted and old. He's also written texts in the background in spidery handwriting that look like nineteenth-century field notes. The texts come from his research and readings, and include sizable excerpts from a translation of the Matanga Lila, an ancient Sanskrit text on elephant lore. *Nila* is the painting's title. It's a tremendously ambitious work of art, the most spectacular thing I've seen in a long time, and Ford is understandably pleased with it. "This is one piece I do feel really confident about. Usually, I feel that the works I've done have an Achilles' heel, and I'm a little afraid that criticism could be leveled against them that would be just plain old right. But this piece sort of fell out of me, and there's something about it that makes me not give a fuck if anyone gets it or not. I feel I don't have to worry about it. It's like a kid that grew up and is going to be fine." □

NATURAL SELECTION Ford, OPPOSITE, in his studio with a panel of *Nila* and an earlier work, *Pandit*, of 1997. Portrait by Joseph Cultice.

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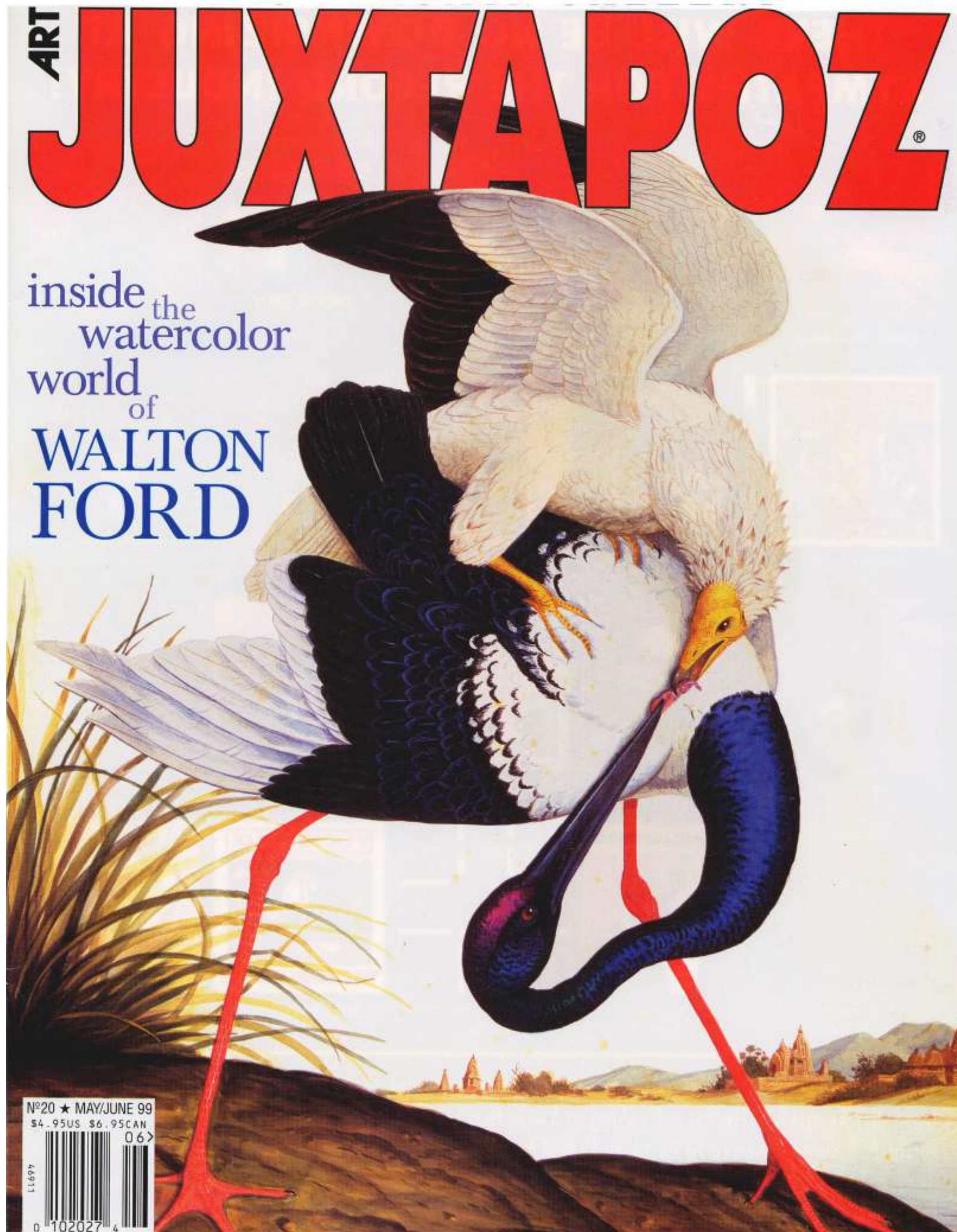
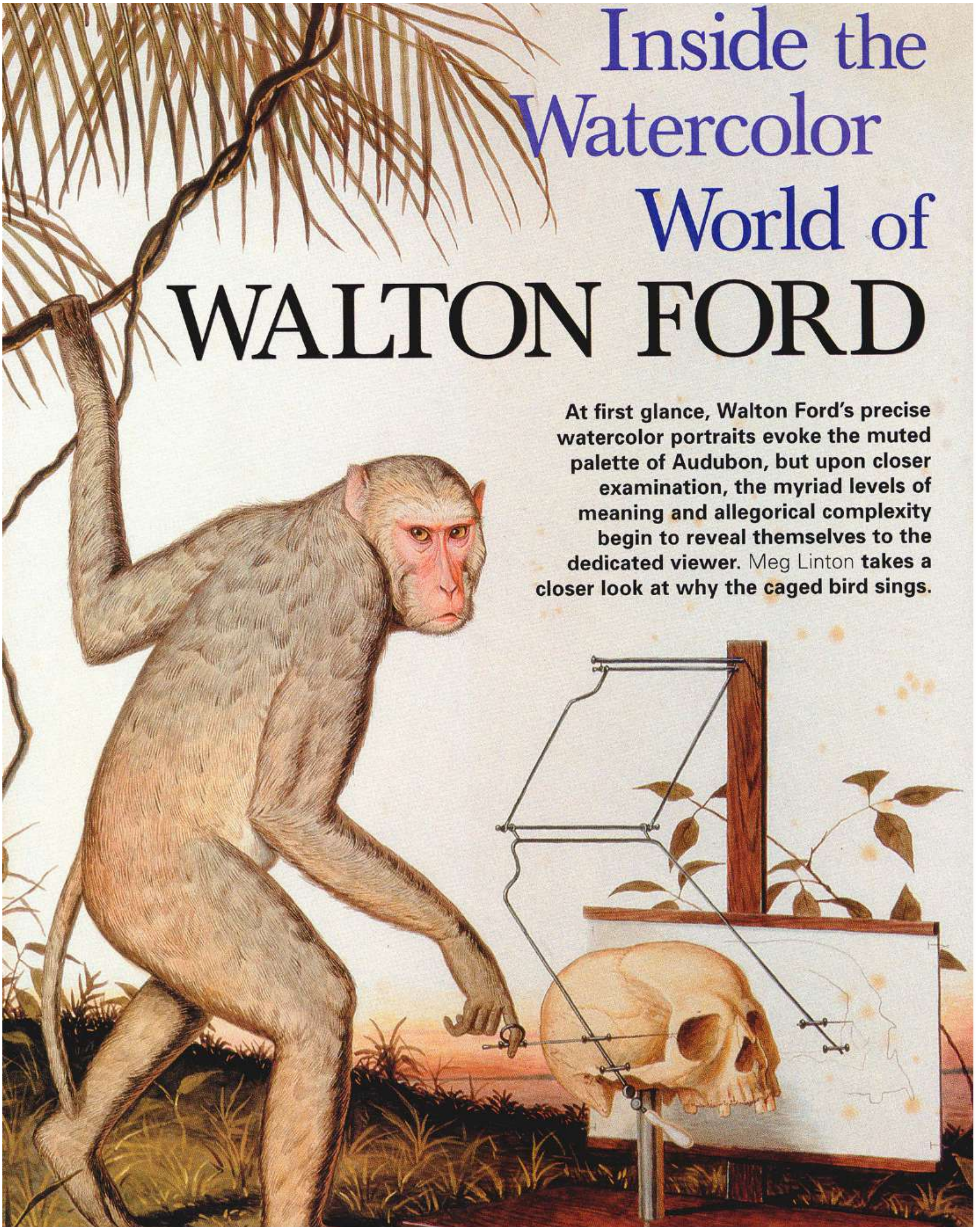
JUXTAPOZ
Art & Culture

Inside the Watercolor World of Walton Ford

MEG LINTON
MAY / JUNE 1999




Inside the
Watercolor
World of
WALTON FORD
At first glance, Walton Ford's precise
watercolor portraits evoke the muted
palette of Audubon, but upon closer
examination, the myriad levels of
meaning and allegorical complexity
begin to reveal themselves to the
dedicated viewer. Meg Linton takes a
closer look at why the caged bird sings.

IN THE LATE NINETEENTH CENTURY, a gentleman by the name of Eugene Schieffelin had a grand vision. He wanted New York's Central Park to be filled with all of the birds mentioned in Shakespeare's literary works. In 1890, he actually released a number of non-native species into the park, including 100 European starlings. Most of the birds died, but the starlings thrived. By 1910, this pretty, nasty, little bird had invaded the Midwest and by 1940 had infiltrated California.

"I guess the starlings finally made it to Alaska in the fifties. They must be in South America by now. It's an extremely aggressive species, and it drives other birds from their nests. The starlings practice polygamy—in fact, there isn't a sin the starling doesn't embrace. But aside from this, they can be really beautiful. Their song can be interesting but also quite shrill and garbled. Like Anglo-Saxons, they've gone everywhere we've gone and displaced the native species." (Walton Ford, interview with Ron Platt).

This little tidbit of natural history is the kind of odd story Walton Ford finds fascinating. For him, the European starling is the Anglo-Saxon incarnate, and it appears in many of his watercolors as the opportunistic, ill-informed Westerner ready to induct so-called third world countries into the global economy. These meticulous and sensational watercolors of birds and other natural life are, of course, an homage to the great American naturalist, John James Audubon; but perhaps more important they are politically charged commentaries on present day foreign policy, trade relations, and cultural affairs. The images are detailed narratives with protagonists, antagonists, and innocent bystanders, which are to be read for their content as well as admired for their beauty.

By using beauty and pictorial familiarity, Ford seduces us into his "unnatural" world. He poses, in the same composition, disparate but complementary species—a North American belted kingfisher with an Indian counterpart like the white-breasted kingfisher—that would never meet in the wild, and uses their inherent characteristics to represent cultural, political, or philosophical conflict. He expands Audubon's habit/trademark of anthropomorphizing his subjects into heroic, predatory, sheepish, or cowardly animals by using the various avians as symbols for nations, lobbyists, or investors. Ford's decision to emulate Audubon's style follows an earlier body of work dedicated to dispelling American folklore surrounding the nineteenth-century wildlife painter.

Audubon, the consummate American naturalist, was French. His father sent him to America in 1803 at the age of eighteen to prevent him from following Napoleon into battle. He was a handsome man who lived between two languages—never really mastering either—and preferred the frontier to civilization but understood the benefits of the latter. He did marry and become an American citizen. A painter, an adventurer, a good storyteller, and a hunter, Audubon struggled most of his life for money, until he left for Great Britain and published his beautiful portfolio, *Birds of America*, 1827–38. While publishing and selling his portfolio in Edinburgh and London, he indulged himself in the creation and cultivation of his "American frontiersman" persona by wearing a deerskin suit, painting self-portraits as a wild hunter in American forests, and writing an outlandish autobiography of his kills. The picture he painted of a frontiersman fighting Indians and hunting bears added to the promotion of America as a wealth of exotic nature and opportunity. He flourished among Europeans as a purveyor of the exciting tales of the New World, capitalizing on their curiosity and desire for vast open spaces, untamed land, and new sources of income.

In his early oil paintings, Ford approached Audubon as an historical figure rather than an artist, "and showed what the naturalist's images meant in terms of wildlife carnage," (David Frankel, *Artforum*, Oct '97). He caught Audubon "behind the scenes" and revealed his secrets by depicting episodes showing the necessary or unnecessary slaughter required to render a creature's likeness in scientific detail. Audubon would take a dead bird, if it was not too damaged by buckshot, arrange it in various poses, and then draw it. Sometimes he would nail the body to a board and contort the bird to expose as many of its field marks as possible, thus giving the bird an unnatural appearance on the page. For the artist, a good day's work would result in at least 100 dead carcasses. Ford then "placed this aspect of Audubon ... into a larger and damning picture of white presence in the Americas, our ancestors' attitude towards the land and towards what they found there." (David Frankel) Some say if John James Audubon were living today, he would use a camera instead of a gun to still his subject, but a reading of his journals suggests that he possessed a disturbing thirst for blood not necessarily associated with this type of scientific collecting and documentation.

During the creation of the epic oil paintings, which were primarily devoted to exposing the "whole truth" of our American past, Ford soon realized he could create his own "Audubon" watercolors to discuss current affairs within a historical context. Today, Ford uses many of Audubon's pictorial stylings, including the distortion of the bird; however, he uses distortion to create a disturbing effect, not as a way to scientifically identify a species. In his watercolors *Conclusions* and *Na raamro* (a Nepalanese phrase meaning "no good"), both of the featured birds are crammed onto the page as if being forced into unnatural boundaries. The contortion of the form becomes a metaphor for oppression. He also incorporates Audubon's habit of making field notes in the borders of his paintings and mimics Audubon's handwriting. However, Ford's "field notes" are filled with quotes from international tourism policies, nineteenth century literature, and current periodicals. The commentary in the watercolors exhibited here relates primarily to India, and results from a 1995 trip, when Ford traveled there with his family for six months. This trip fueled these works and inspired the development of his most complex subject matter—tourism, cultural misunderstanding, and the subtleties of economic imperialism.

"When you're in India, you're directly implicated because there is more of a caste structure in place. I was at the top of the entire economic schema there. So many people depend on you for their livelihood because you're a tourist. That's very painful at times because there are nine hundred million people there, a good third of whom live in a poverty that nobody in the West can conceive of. Their poverty line has to do with having enough calories... But everybody knows about that India. What I didn't know anything about was that as a Westerner you're also considered an outcast—an untouchable—because they

know you eat meat or wear leather. If you're talking to a Brahmin or a devout Hindu, they're being very kind just to deal with you. You're a pretty repulsive creature to them. Because I was not Hindu and I was out of my culture, I didn't understand what was going on. You don't even realize it, but you're getting treated like an idiot, because to them you're behaving like one. So, that's the other side of it. Westerners are an abomination and a source of income." (Walton Ford, interview with Ron Platt)

Ford did not paint while he was in India, but he gathered information and took hundreds of photographs that he intended to use when he returned to his studio in New York. He was fascinated with the Indian manner of appropriating select Western elements/products, as well as how subversive and futile it seems for Westerners to try and convert this 5,000-year-old culture into a nation of good, Western-style consumers. *NGO wallahs*, (NGO—non-governmental organizations) speaks of misguided altruistic acts performed by such organizations as the Peace Corps or religious charities. In Hindi, a wallah is an expert, and anyone can be a wallah—for example, Ford would be a painting wallah. The central figure is the Indian marabou (also known as the adjutant stork). This bird is a powerful scavenger who frequents dried-up marshes and dumps. It eats garbage, stranded fish, frogs, reptiles, insects, and carrion. Gathered at the stork's feet are several native birds—all requiring specific diets—surrounding a European starling who is doling out Hershey's Kisses. Instead of providing substantial food, aid, or tools for self-sufficiency, NGOs are handing out the sweetness of the West—capitalism—and trying to create a desire for it through an attraction or addiction to Western products.

"Starlings practice polygamy—in fact there isn't a sin the starling doesn't embrace ... Like Anglo-Saxons, they've gone everywhere we've gone and displaced the native species."

>>Walton Ford

Development Strategy is one of Ford's smaller works, but it speaks out profoundly about global marketing and the premeditated destruction of local economy and subsistence-living. It features the ever-efficient kingfishers, who are "catch-of-the-day" wallahs, used in this instance to represent the small-time fisherman who sells his product to the locals. This lone entrepreneur is not recorded on any GNP report. He exists purely outside the system. Seen hanging from the tree next to the kingfishers are several tacky, shiny Western fishing lures. These lures are being marketed as a way to fish that is technically superior to the way it has been done for thousands of years. The idea is that the "natives" should use the lures and become dependent on the product, which makes them participants in the global economy and destroys their self-sufficiency. In a personal interview with Ford, he gave a perfect example of this type of strategy being used in India:

"When you buy a cup of tea in India, it comes in an earthenware cup that's been baked, but it's unglazed. It's like a red-clay flowerpot you would buy at a nursery. It's perfectly sanitary and is a beautiful little cup. When you're finished with your tea, you throw the cup on the ground, it shatters into a million pieces,

and turns to earth. They have been doing this for centuries. In the oldest archeological digs in India, they uncovered these cups ... When we were there, we started seeing plastic disposable cups. You would see pigs and cows in the gutters chewing on them because they have a little sugar on the edges. The animals were choking on fragments of these plastic cups, and now there's litter in the streets ... This thing had worked so well for thousands of years. People were employed on a local level baking these cups. They're baked, one-use, sanitary, biodegradable cups. Everything about it was perfect. You will never see a better cup in your whole life for drinking tea. The scary, insidious thing about all this is we want them to buy the plastic cup. We will do everything in our power to make it harder for them to get the clay cup, until we own the market, and then they are screwed, because we will own the market and their environment will go to hell."

From the wildlife and conflicts of India, Ford is expanding his vision to include other areas of the world in turmoil. His most recent body of work from 1998 is represented by one monumental watercolor called *Chingado*. This provocative image speaks loudly about the ongoing revolution begun in 1994 in Chiapas, Mexico. The bull represents the Spanish, beginning with Cortez, and the jaguar symbolizes the powerful spirit of the Maya. The two beasts are pictured simultaneously fighting and copulating. The bull seems to have a stronghold on the situation, but still he is branded with the Mayan hieroglyph of war, while the jaguar has its teeth clenched in the bull's throat. In the distance, flames rise behind Palenque. Ford suggests that the risk is always that both sides will destroy what they are fighting to preserve. This violent dance represents the complex and confusing conflicts created when two or more cultures collide. These battles are being and have been fought on every continent, and such conflicts are a part of our natural history as human beings. The positive effect is one of blended cultures, new languages, new thought, greater understanding, and a stronger community.

The work of Walton Ford is beautiful, compelling, forceful, and brutal. He makes us feel comfortable by offering images we think we know, images we think we can digest in five seconds flat and never question. However, these images take time to read: they are novels rather than short stories. The tension between beauty and horror, surface and depth, attraction and repulsion, immediacy and delay tangle the plot and make these works remarkably effective as current political commentaries. Ford is addressing the present state of the world through nineteenth century notions of natural history, which have strongly influenced capitalism and economic imperialism. He seduces us with brilliant technical skill lashed to lush colors and majestic fauna, and then he forces us to look at our often vain, illogical, and cruel human actions. He is holding up the proverbial mirror. ★

Meg Linton is curator of the exhibition Avatars: The Watercolors of Walton Ford *at the University Art Museum, California State University, Long Beach, (January 26–March 26, 1999) and Executive Director of the Santa Barbara Contemporary Arts Forum.*

A catalogue of the exhibition is available; contact the University Art Museum at uam@csulb.edu or 562 985 5761. Contact Paul Kasmin Gallery in New York, 212 219 3219 or Kohn Turner Gallery in Los Angeles, 310 854 5400, to obtain the art of Walton Ford.

VOGUE

Animal Magnetism

Walton Ford combines the beauty and precision of a nineteenth-century naturalist with a subversive, modern wit.

DODIE KAZANJIAN
JULY 1999

animal magnetism

Walton Ford combines the beauty and precision of a nineteenth-century naturalist with a subversive modern wit, finds **Dodie Kazanjian.**

The dying camel takes up three-quarters of the watercolor, which is ten feet long and five feet high. Life-size, the beast lies on pink sand, its ungainly legs folded beneath it. Three Egyptian vultures, with bright yellow heads and pink claws, perch hungrily on its hump, and a European starling, that notoriously rude bird, gazes curiously up into one vulture's genitalia. This is *Necropolis,* a work in progress by Walton Ford, the 39-year-old artist whose astonishingly beautiful and disturbing paintings have opened a new chapter in the ongoing rebirth of figurative art.

By the time *Necropolis* leaves Ford's studio, in a former lumberyard in Great Barrington, Massachusetts, for its New York unveiling at the Paul Kasmin Gallery this month, there will be a lot more going on in it—more starlings, maybe a line of slaves in the distance, and a lot of handwritten excerpts from ancient Egyptian texts and from *Flaubert in Egypt.* The dying camel was something Flaubert described in his letters home. The prurient starling is Flaubert himself, obsessed with sex and the grotesqueries of foreign places. Animals usually stand in for humans in Ford's pictures, and the strong, if subliminal, narrative underpinning often has to do with the imperialism of Western culture. "Flaubert was totally bored with the things other people thought were great in Egypt, like the pyramids," Ford tells me. "He just went whoring all the time. I was interested in that kind of tourism, the idea of the East as a place of sex, which is a very common Western conception. I'm interested in taboos, and Flaubert was a big one for that."

Ford began copying the drawings of John James Audubon when he was five years old. His studio is crammed with natural-history books and prints and photographs. (Unlike Audubon, who killed his subjects, he works from photographs or from specimens in the Museum of Natural History.) Latching on to figurative painting at the Rhode Island School of Design, Ford took it in a direction all his own—one that combines an uncanny mastery of nineteenth-century draftsmanship and observed detail with hypercontemporary, dark, and often humorous social satire. Right now he's dividing his time between *Necropolis* and a print that features a Cuban Red Macaw standing in for Fidel Castro. "The Cuban Red Macaw is a beautiful bird that's been extinct since 1864," he says. "Some of them lived to be 70 years old, so they're a lot like Fidel, the last Red dictator on the planet. I see him as this old, smart bird, sitting on a branch, surrounded by the traps we've laid for him. He hasn't been fooled by one of them. It's a history of the ways we tried to oust Fidel and never have been able to." The print will also be ready this month, and the edition is already nearly sold-out.

Ford's major influences, besides Audubon, are Vladimir Nabokov, Hieronymus Bosch, Edward Lear, Andy Warhol, and Lewis Carroll. "People like that make the assumption that you're intelligent, that you understand as many things as they do, even though they just leave you in the dust. They give you permission not to worry whether anyone's going to get it or not. I want my work to be beautiful and dense and difficult in the way that really good literature is." □

NATURAL TALENT: Ford's watercolor in process, *Necropolis,* ABOVE, and, OPPOSITE, a new untitled print.

ARTFORUM

Walton Ford

DAVID FRANKEL

OCTOBER 1997

Jennifer Bolande, untitled, from the series "Forest Spirits," 1997, sepia-toned print, 20 x 16".

Walton Ford, *Dancla*, 1997, oil on panel, 63 x 46".

WALTON FORD

PAUL KASMIN GALLERY

Walton Ford's paintings belie a jewellike presence with a postcolonial politics. Based on nineteenth-century American styles both naive and careful, they seem as if they could have been made back then, as though Ford were looking through those painters' eyes; yet they have explored scenes that their styles' originators might well have seen, indeed sometimes *must* have seen, but did not register as subjects for art. Addressing the ornithological painter John James Audubon, for example, Ford approached him not only as an artist but as a historical figure, and showed what the naturalist's images meant in terms of wildlife carnage. Ford placed this aspect of Audubon, obvious once you've thought of it (those birds had to be stilled for him to paint them), into a larger and damning picture of white presence in the Americas, our ancestors' attitude to the land and to what they found there.

Ford recently moved from viewing his own country with a self-consciously distanced eye to being unambiguously an onlooker in someone else's. Traveling with his family to India for six months, he found that he "had never been to a more alien place." And, trying to deal with this experience in his work, who should he fall back on but Audubon, that old barbarian (at least as Ford has shown him)? The oils and watercolors of birds that resulted look more like Audubon's own work than most of Ford's previous images, yet are not-so-subtly different. For one thing, they are set in India, and make room for all kinds of foreignness in both background and foreground. For another, the birds themselves are foreign—or, rather, the main protagonists usually are, though the images generally include some combination of Eastern and Western avifauna. The strained, even contorted postures, on the other hand, could be straight out of Audubon—which only shows how an artist like Ford can make us reinterpret images we might once have thought natural-looking or actually graceful.

I recognize starlings and kingfishers, and understand that the Indian examples include hornbills and bustards. As representatives of East and West, these birds are often in combat or at least in tension. Around and behind them, vignettelike scenes extend this cultural conflict, as when a turbaned acolyte prevents a missionary from smashing a lingam. Sometimes, though, the point is more about the way cultures coexist, intermingle, and accommodate each other (Indian people, for example, having as much of an appetite for Heineken as Americans do). Scratched into the paint in the oils, quotations from different sources—nineteenth-century travelers' accounts, twentieth-century Lonely Planet guide-books, the AP—reinforce the viewer's sense of the alternating attraction and repulsion between cultures.

Ford's earlier work conveyed a powerful sense that history was being unearthed and put on view in terms that would have been familiar to the people who actually lived it, yet who would not or could not represent it this way themselves. Like many artists who have made a vocabulary their own, he must now either abandon that vocabulary or turn it to the digestion of new material—as he does in this body of work, addressing his own experience as a traveler, or what he calls an "ugly American." If the results are less surprising than the earlier paintings, they are no less thoughtful and perhaps more personal—not a bad dimension for political art, which can come across pat and preachy unless its morals are moored in some complex state of feeling. Meanwhile the paintings themselves, and particularly the watercolors, are if anything more accomplished than before, and as good-looking as you could wish.

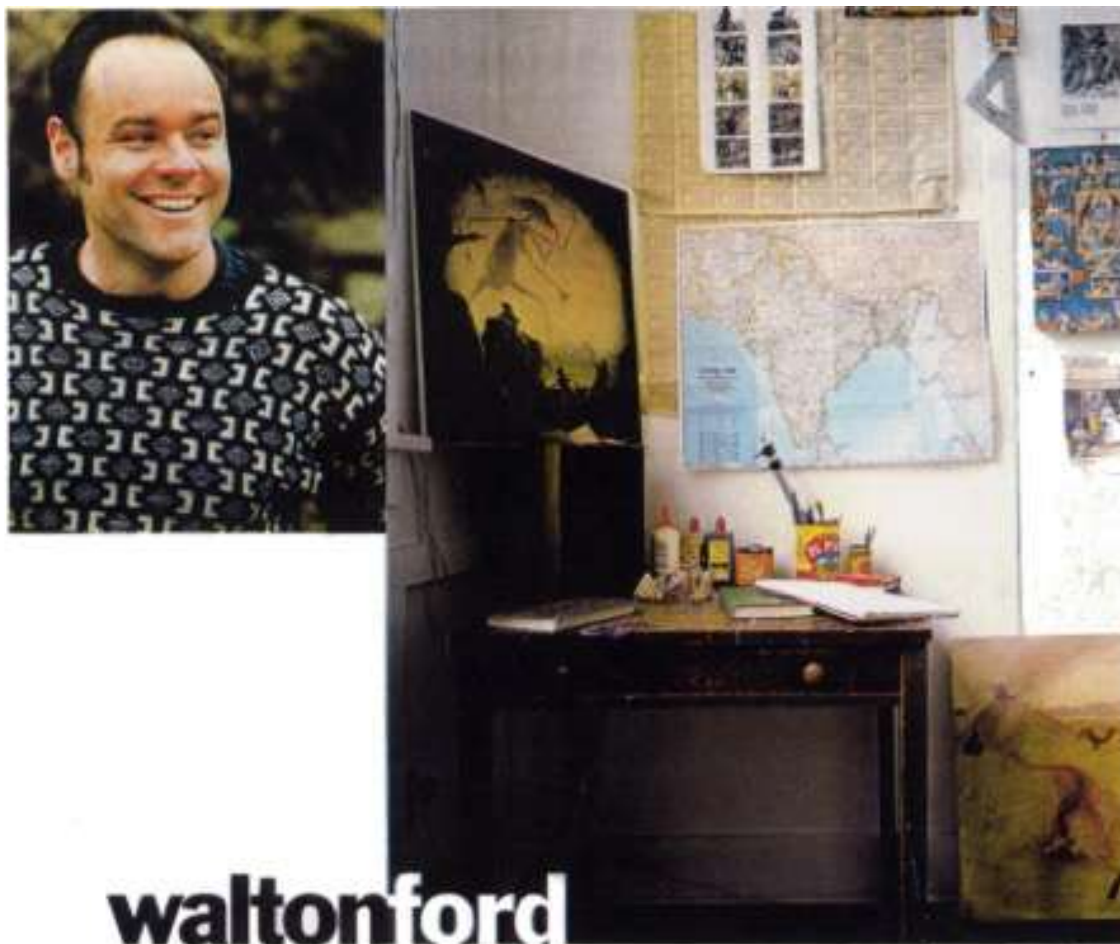
—*David Frankel*

ELLE

Walton Ford

Crosscurrents of seduction and repulsion in a revisionist Audubon milieu

NEVILLE WAKEFIELD
JUNE / JULY 1997



Crosscurrents of seduction and repulsion in a revisionist Audubon milieu

"Ever since I was a kid, I have been into birds, into feathers and textures, into drawing and painting them," says Walton Ford, describing his most recent work, which was exhibited at New York's Paul Kasmin Gallery this spring. Indeed, Ford's series on the birds of India rings with the exotic colors and details sought after by only the most obsessive ornithologists. Painted in the style of John J. Audubon, the great naturalist and a forefather of America's conservation movement, they are the work of a virtuoso draftsman and watercolorist and rank among the most accomplished bird paintings this side of the 19th century. Like their antecedents, their language is that of a suburban den, but the strange contortions of the birds themselves, the configurations of unrelated species, and quirky titles like *Low Opinion*, *Crash Course*, and *Development Strategy* bring the whiff of dissent to the musty atmosphere of anachronism. For all the self-evident beauty and delight in florid plumage, all is not what it seems in paradise lost.

Ford, who lives in upstate New York with his wife, artist Julie Jones, and their three-year-old daughter, Lillian, has always been sensitive to the contradictions of his Southern family's past; an early series of oil paintings was based on the autobiography of his great-great-grandmother Emily Donelson Walton.▸

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KASMIN

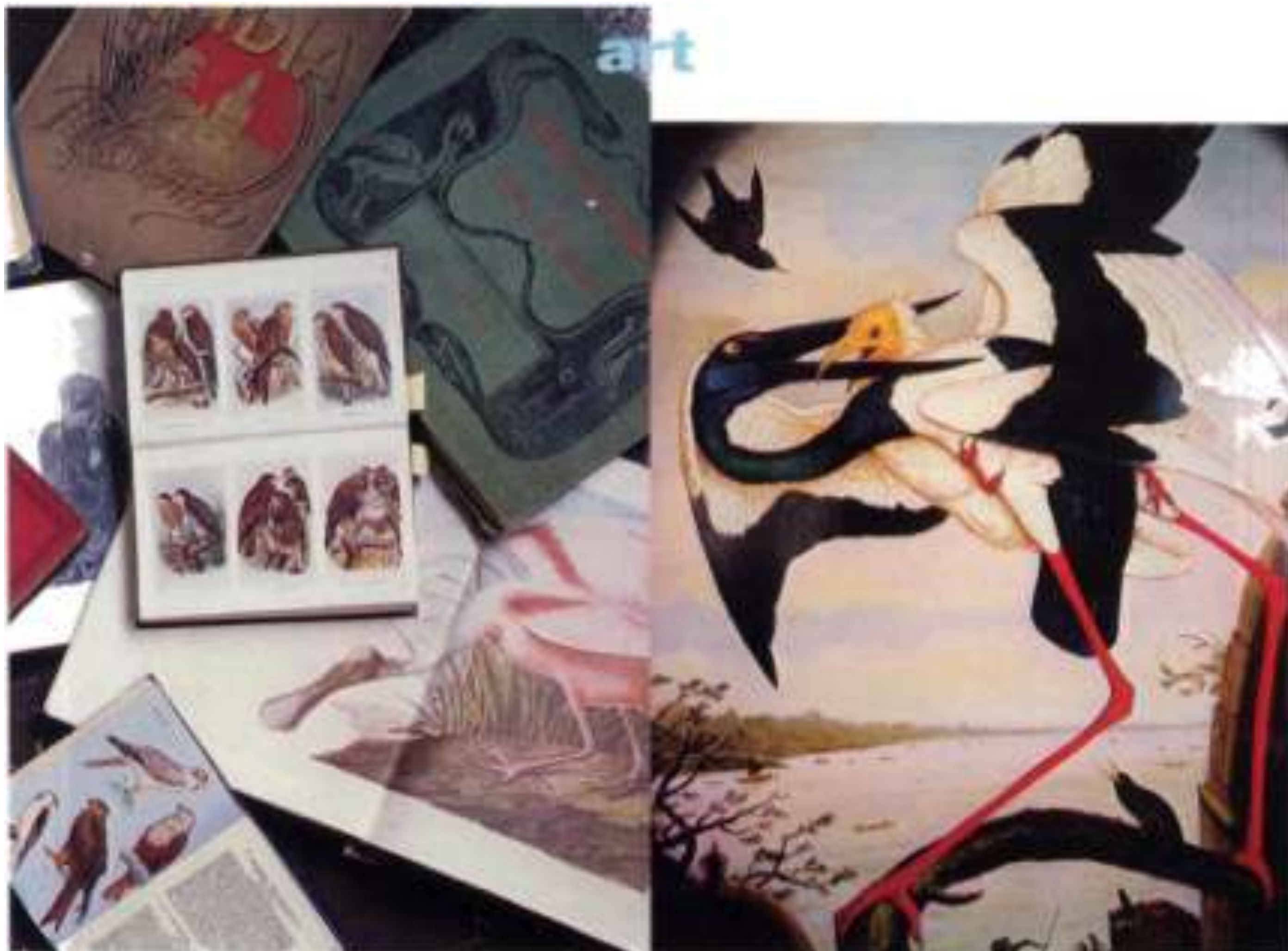
Left to right: *Development Strategy* (1996, 30"x22") and *Dialogue* (1996, 60"x60"), both watercolor, gouache, ink, and pencil on paper. See Resources.

"It started with simple spoofs of Audubon knockoffs, such as the one of the flamingo being shot"

and her reminiscences about life on her family's slaveholding plantation in Tennessee. Subsequent works, including *Frontier* and *In the Field with Audubon*, depict the bloodletting attending the conquest of America in the name of civilization and science. In these paintings Ford merges elements of the Hudson River School with the European traditions of Bosch and Brueghel to create a nightmarish vision that mimics and burrows beneath the scumbled glaze of history. Bathed in a warm sepia glow, their light might be that of a perpetual dawn, although the action below—a gun-toting white family fleeing a razed home, a trio of bear cubs being burned from their last refuge in the branches of a tree—leaves little doubt that these are clear skies clouded by carnage.

Crosscurrents of seduction and repulsion run through all of Ford's work, but they find their most exquisite tension in the paintings of birds based on Audubon's watercolor plates. "It started off with very simple spoofs of Audubon knockoffs, such as the one of the flamingo being shot," says Ford. "This was the kind of art I grew up with, so it was natural for me to paint birds just as it was natural to want to try and fuck with it, to twist it as much as possible." The result: watercolors that gradually gained in formal and intellectual intensity. Like the Audubon originals, which were drawn from freshly shot birds pinned into macabre dioramas, Ford's birds are also configured and distorted to fit the painting surface, and visual pleasure is played against their stilted, taxidermied appearances. While the artist describes Audubon's oeuvre as "fantastic and sublime," he adds that "the positions are so odd because he's manipulating dead animals. They are like Shaker tables—really American in that they are so stiff."

Ford's eccentric, revisionist art has largely escaped the overexposure that consumes fresh talent, although he is appreciative of the support and patronage of Irving Blum, a collector and dealer who has eight large Ford ▷



Left to right: Part of Ford's collection of 19th-century British and Indian bird guidebooks; *Sadhana*, 1997 (oil on wooden panel; 63"x46").

Audubon's animals "are like Shaker tables—really American in that they are so still"

watercolors climbing the stairwell of his Bridgehampton, New York, home. "He has perfected his watercolors to an absolutely astonishing degree," Blum says of the artist. "People like them because of the abundance of facility, because they can see how expertly they are done. But in truth that's only a single component. You really have to get into them to understand their darker aspect, and that's when you find the hope in them."

Ford's latest series was inspired by a visit to India, where he and his family spent six months traveling. Struck by the conflicts and paradoxes indigenous to Indian culture, and their exacerbation by tourism, Ford wondered how to make sense of his experience through his art. "All I could get a handle on was my own interactions, and at a certain point it just seemed to make sense to make the birds do it and to express the conflict through them in much the same way that Audubon does."

In these allegorical narratives, magnificent native Indian birds are cast as the protagonists in intricate, surreal dramas marked by highly unlikely pecking orders. The watercolor *Development Strategy* shows three kingfishers perched above a slow-moving river. Entangled in the tree branches are two iridescent fishing lures, which they survey bemusedly, as if their natural food-gathering methods had been superseded. Another painting, a large oil called *Householder*, depicts a hornbill surrounded by groups of chattering starlings. In the distance, nude sunbathers inform us that the setting is the beaches of Goa. Hidden in the painting's murkier margins are phrases and texts culled from a Lonely Planet travel guide and a newspaper clipping telling of a Goan man's self-immolation in protest of a proposed beauty pageant; they are a wry counterpoint to Audubon's own quasi-scientific annotations.

"The starlings have become the Europeans," the artist explains, "opportunistic migratory birds that start in Europe and end up everywhere. Like us, they do some good and some evil. They are the polygamists, whereas the hornbill mates for life, fed by its partner while it incubates the chicks. This is all pretty much as it is in natural history, but of course in real life the two species would never meet like this."

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ARTFORUM

To Be a Pilgrim: Walton Ford

JIMMIE DURHAM
JANUARY 1992

To Be a Pilgrim: Walton Ford

Jimmie Durham

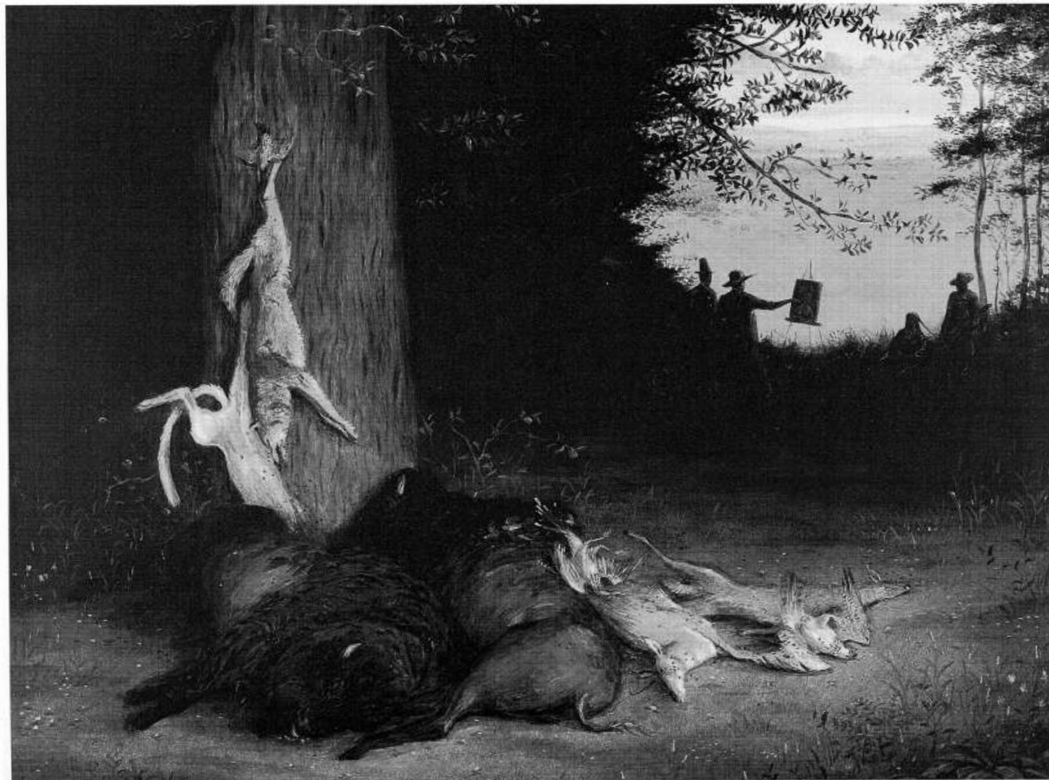
A couple of years ago Walton Ford was making small illustrations for the diary of an ancestor of his who had lived on a Southern plantation. The stories were about slavery and slaves; the diarist was a woman, so not quite a slaveholder, just confusedly complicit. The atrocities revealed in her diary were of the everyday, common, complicated sort during slavery times. She wrote, for example, that when her father sold off the two little girls she used to dress up like dolls, she missed them very much. Her last name, Walton, was included in the images along with Walton Ford's own.

Photocopied as black and white posters and plastered around downtown Manhattan, these pictures were quietly stunning. Their statement was in the realm of art primarily because it was in the larger realm of U.S. culture, not because they'd invented some new art style or trick. The posters weren't graffiti, and weren't slick and adlike. They seemed confessional, in an intelligent way, and honestly humble.

In the South, it's still not unusual to hear defenses of the plantation system. And it's normal to hear defenses of the South itself, in ways that mix nostalgia and fantasy monstrously. But it is rare for a white Southerner to look disinterestedly at the South's legacy. Ford did, and implicated the rest of the U.S. at the same time. He didn't pretend to an attitude of superiority, nor to one of undue guilt. His position seemed that of a thoughtful person who, having perceived some typically avoidable truths about the U.S., didn't try to escape the realities but instead straightforwardly proclaimed them, showed them.

Of course it's easy to poke at the U.S. opportunistically in one's art. It's even within an American tradition to do so; to point at the agreed-upon follies of "less-enlightened" Americans for the comfort of some elite or another. Ford, though, seems to have placed himself (or to have recognized his place) not as an observer but within American culture, which he treats with intelligent and analytical perception—and intolerance. It is a valuable and rare combination.

Walton Ford, *Princess*, 1990, oil on wood, 37¾ x 47¾".



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Ford is a true iconoclast. As an insider he knows where the icons are kept and what sorts of beliefs they hold in stasis. His recent work is a series of paintings, begun in late 1990, which take on the beginning of American painting, its "spirituality," the country's history, the little house on the prairie, and John James Audubon, all from the perspective of unediting the imagery of the American story. One picture is worth a thousand words in our knowledge of the past. We tend to believe the images, the paintings, simply because there is little acknowledged discourse in which to argue. Especially in the U.S., where we are constantly told a complex lie as though it were history and also told that Americans have no use for history, visual portrayals of the physical land and of Americans doing things on it have a strong hold on knowledge and imagination. Ford seems to know early American art as though constantly aware that he grew up with it and needs to engage it. Not only do his paintings look like their older models, there is a stiff quirkiness in his style that makes his canvases seem as though there had actually been some dementedly honest early-American painter. I say "honest" because Ford includes everything the original artist omitted. Maybe at first his paintings might have said to the artists of those days no more than "You forgot the flies; there must've been many flies." Then flies became for him the same type of symbol that eagles and bluebirds were for them, except that flies symbolize not nobility and peacefulness but putridity.

I've heard it said that Ford isn't such a good draftsman, but most of the paintings he addresses in this series weren't at all well painted themselves. They're part of history's large body of art in which the picture takes precedence over the techniques of painting. Probably the largest part of American painting, taken as a whole, falls into this category. If Ford's work does so too, we must say that his primary interest is his subject matter; he is presenting visual narratives. If he painted with greater virtuosity the pictures might lose their power and also their "authenticity." This authenticity that does not come from technique looks more as though it came from rage.

In an earlier group of paintings in a very different style, Ford portrayed the realities (instead of the sentimentalities) of adolescence. In a work called *Lunch Break with Nature Boy*, 1986–87, some boys are sitting around in a room. A slightly older boy bursts through the door holding a long black snake. "Nature Boy" is fearless at catching wildlife and then using it to scare kids. You may have known him when you were a child.

Audubon, who seems to be a special project of Ford's, was not exactly Nature Boy. He was a full-grown monster who for years made a living by killing birds and animals and shipping their skins to Europe. A perfect American type of the very bad sort, he had to have taken a special joy in death and conquest. Audubon's bird paintings, often touted for their "lifelike" accuracy, actually look quite strange, the postures weirdly distorted, as in some painful ballet. This is because the birds were all dead and arranged for display, like puppets. Once Audubon had a live eagle and wanted to kill it so he could paint it. To have a bird entire, rather than mangled and shot full of holes, was an opportunity too good to pass up. Audubon tried to kill the eagle with poison and with gas, and it took days.

Walton Ford has a painting called *A Spasm for Audubon*, 1991. Audubon, wearing an Indian robe that could also be a Napoleonic cape (one of Ford's favorite metaphors), sits with his easel, brushes, rifle, tomahawk, and calipers in a clearing in early America's impenetrably dense forest. A dead eagle is posed, if that's the right word, on a once magnificent tree that has been cut back to a stump as though with a chain saw. Audubon looks sickly; perhaps he has poisoned himself killing the eagle. The beautiful early-American sunset beyond the forest—there are many sunsets in this series; the artist faces us west—mixes the Hudson school with Caspar David Friedrich. But the forest itself looks kind of burnt, and high in the air, almost invisible among the trees, a ghostly Iroquois "false face" mask, an unsettling spirit, stares out from it, in a symbolic haunting. The host is keeping an eye on the destructive guest. Ford takes the tradition of symbolism in classical European painting and with a funny twist on American bravado exaggerates it by going it one or

two better. He does the "stage spotlight" lighting of heroic painting to the point of absurdity, but the humor is incredibly sad.

In the Field with Audubon, 1991, shows the three bears (but they are all cubs). Audubon and other thugs, with attendant dogs, have driven them up into a tree. Though the gang carries rifles, the point isn't to shoot the three bears, but to set the tree on fire. The men are having their sport. To kill animals for pleasure has of course a long aristocratic tradition in Europe. In America it obtained its democracy, and in one form or another it is almost compulsory here. It is part of the American religion, which makes it patriotic.

Killing animals is also scientific. The buyers of Audubon's skins were European museums and scientists. In the brightly lit foreground of *The Naming of Names*, 1990, some empirical zoologist holds in one hand a dead bird and with the other writes in a notebook. He faces a large pile of animals killed for his interest. Behind him, in the darker part of the painting, two men are gutting and skinning more animals. The investigation of life in process and in whole relationships is a relatively new idea in science. It's vivisection that's compulsory in many U.S. schools as the proper way to impart knowledge about life. Ford's paintings show us the historical background, the known but almost unconscious construct, of American culture's feelings about the physical land on which it sits. They also illuminate (that silly spotlight!) America's confusion of science with conquest, and how we are educated into such attitudes through images.

Walton Ford, *Six Fingers/Sharp Teeth* (detail), 1989, linoleum block print with type, diptych, this panel: 26½ x 19".

In *False Face*, 1990, a European-looking family on horseback rides out of a painting by Bruegel into the land of the Last Mohican. Another Iroquois mask grins at them from deep within the forest primeval. Perhaps they have not noticed this false face, but the horse maybe has, for it has stumbled in panic, throwing its riders. Just as well it did, because they were all about to kill themselves galloping over a cliff. The spotlight shines brightest on the baby, which is flying through the air toward the abyss. In its white gown and with its appearance of pleasant unconcern, it looks like a prophetic little diving angel; an involuntary suicide.

The painting is very like the jokes American Indians tell each other about "whites." Its metaphoric heavy-handedness works as humor, but the humor is about American self-destructiveness and obliviousness. Ford accomplishes American Indian jokes often, and they are remarkable. He portrays Native Americans without seeming to appropriate either the images or the "plight." Often it seems that Americans have no way of accepting the kind of joke that contains truths that seem obvious to anyone else. They may outright refuse to hear (or to tell) such a joke, or they may exclude themselves

from one—tell it on the "other Americans." Tom Wolfe, say, in his 1987 novel *The Bonfire of the Vanities*, tells a lot of basically untrue jokes on everyone except himself and the readers who are to be considered his peer group. This is also the kind of joke told by H.L. Mencken, Johnny Carson, and George Bush. Naturally it is a seductive and comforting position. It also promotes a superficiality of perception that keeps the state's agenda on a smooth track.

Most Americans (whether or not it's most humans does not concern us here) are too defensive to laugh at a joke in which they themselves are implicated. Like an adult with a recalcitrant child, Ford tries to josh us out of our meanness. There is a maturity of thought in these paintings. Not all the jokes are funny—*Princess*, 1990, for example, which tells a joke about the early American paintings of American Indian women, is actually entirely sinister. It is an illustration of a crime. In America's discourse about itself, the crime is covered up with a romantic story.

Walton Ford, *Columbiana-Culebra Island Amazon*, 1991, watercolor on paper, 39 x 30".

Sometime early in the 17th century, the geographer Richard Hakluyt translated into English a tale about a Spanish soldier in Florida who was captured by the Indians but was saved when the chief's daughter fell in love with him. The story followed an existing archetype: in the Middle Ages, there was a whole genre of "enamored Moslem princess" stories revolving around the Crusades, and long before that there was Julius Caesar, Mark Antony, and the Egyptian princess Cleopatra. A writer rather than a traveler, Hakluyt was still enough of an exotica expert that he briefed the Virginia Company on where its colonists should land

Walton Ford, *False Face*, 1990, oil on wood, 47¾ x 64¾".

when they arrived in the Americas. Among the new colony's proto-Americans were Captain John Smith and John Rolfe—Smith, who would later be rescued from the Indians by Pocahontas, their "princess," and Rolfe, who would marry her. Between them these two men supposedly had pretty much the same experience with Pocahontas and her father, Powhatan, that numerous crusader captains seem to have had with Arab princesses and sultans. Actually it appears just as likely that Smith based his part of the Pocahontas story on the Hakluyt tale about Florida, which may itself be a version of the enamored-Moslem yarn.

But Pocahontas was a real person. The British kidnaped her and Rolfe took her as his wife to London, where she promptly died after giving birth to Rolfe Jr. Today much of the upper class of Virginia claims Pocahontas as an ancestor.

The colonists arrived with script in hand. They invented the story of Pocahontas, and made it replace her own history, as a way of owning her and her people. This is a problem, but the more serious problem for her was that she was physically owned to death. Today we tend (appropriately) to interpret the story of Pocahontas as a kind of American fairy tale. Often, though, we still believe the pictures—we remember seeing Pocahontas saving some white guy's life. (Miles Standish? Daniel Boone? It doesn't matter who.) All of the early colonies had laws against marrying Indians, none against the rape and murder of Indians. The massacre of the Indians began with the colonies and continued as long as possible. (The hunting decreased with the supply of game.) Early American portraits of Indian women also began simultaneously with colonization, but the kidnaping, rape, and murder weren't shown. When we see pictures of the Indian maiden, can we remember the history of her death? Visual images tend to recall other visual images, so we are more likely to remember the next picture, which shows a savage Mohawk man carrying a white woman away into the dark forest.

In *Princess*, an Indian woman sits for her portrait. Beside the painter stands a second man carrying a rifle; behind the "princess" stands a third white man, also with a rifle, keeping the woman in her seat by holding onto her hair. All this is happening "in the dark," in the background of the picture. Spotlit in the foreground is another victory, another trophy—a pile of dead animals, with flies. We have needed this image. It could hardly have been done except as a comment on early American painting: as a joke. There is no escape from the joke, we cannot accuse it of being a bad joke. We cannot complain that it is not funny because it is so obviously meant to be not funny. Yet there is no bad taste here, no dead babies or human gore. The magnificent dead animals are the same ones we see in sporting paintings and *natures mortes*.

Humor ("the best medicine") is given too much place in the U.S. It is as revered as ice cream. America is funny and likes to have fun, but the country is so *mean*, so aggressive. Seen from another planet we must look like that movie *Night of the Funny Dead*.

If we do not remember the past are we condemned to repeat it? If the past is history how can we remember it? George Bush claimed that having learned the lesson of Vietnam, we gave ourselves absolution for that war by achieving our stated goals in Iraq, or almost achieving them. Others say that Bush misinterpreted the lesson of Vietnam. There are many interpretations, and opinion is divided. If we have to argue over history, how can we remember it?

Many people these days seem to feel a need for a strong nationalism, but also to forget the history of this century, let alone the ones before. Maybe they have to forget so they can get on with business. If they have any troublesome doubts or memories, they can always say Look at the Russians, who have never known either business or the democracy that business is said to require. In other words, Those other countries have trouble, and so do I, but basically the U.S. is OK. It's funny, a little weird in the sticks and the boondocks, yet it's generous. We are normal people. The fact that Grant Wood's *American Gothic* couple were our grandparents is only a little bit problematic. They were stiff and puritanical, true, but their lives were hard and they worked hard so that was understandable. Surely no other American painting has been so parodied as *American Gothic*. The parodies are usually soft and nice; making fun of our grandparents.

In the 1960s and '70s American Indian, African-American, and Puerto Rican activists said, as loudly as they could, This country was founded on the genocide of one people and the enslavement of another. The statement, hardly arguable, was not much taken up by white activists. *American Gothic* is American history, genocide is not. If a little genocide was committed in the Wild West (there, not here), Kevin Costner can erase that memory by giving us *Dances with Wolves*. If you'd been alive then, of course you'd have been like Kevin Costner. You wouldn't have been involved.

Walton Ford is really abnormal. His remembrance of the past has no important dates, no proofs of what actually happened when big decisions had to be made, no arguments. He is not painting mustaches on *American Gothic* (though indirectly he does an incisive job on the Marlboro man). Ford's subject begins with America's encyclopedia/bible of visual images. With intellectual honesty, he enters new data into a cultural program that makes imagery stand in for historical knowledge. Maybe his pictures will act like computer viruses. □

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Walton Ford, *A Spasm for Audubon*, 1991, oil on wood, 47¾ x 64¾ ".