

DEAN HOFFMEYER/TIMES-DISPATCH

James Prosek creates exacting representations of wildlife with refreshing differences in watercolor on paper, oil on wood and actual taxidermy.

Real & imagined

An artist chooses fish as his angle, and you can catch an exhibit here

BY ROY PROCTOR
Special Correspondent

The artist called “the Audubon of trout” got an early start. James Prosek drew his first bird when he was 4. Two years later, after his aunt gave him a watercolor set, he began studying wildlife watercolors by John James Audubon and Winslow Homer in books in his Easton, Conn., home. When he was 8, he painted his first fish. The next year, he began trout fishing in Easton’s teeming streams and never stopped.

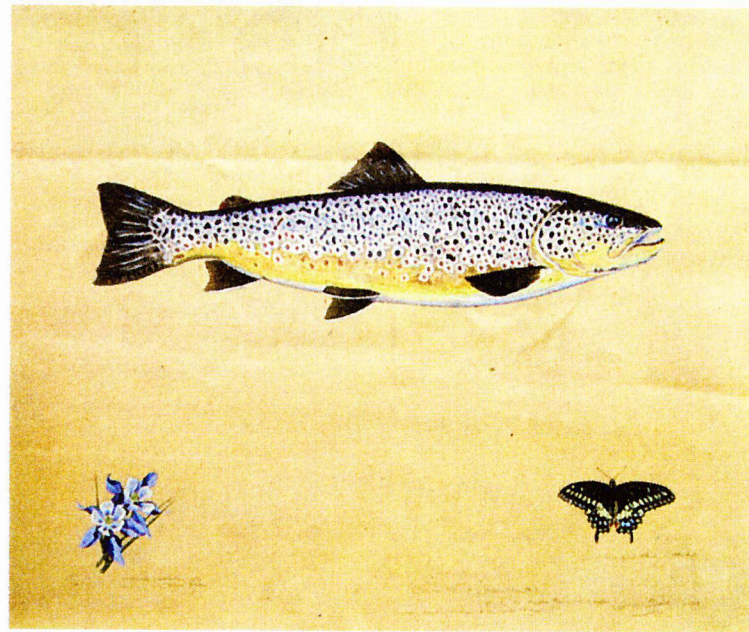
Young James had found his calling.

“There’s no justifying my love of trout,” the boyish-looking Prosek, 34, said as he awaited the reception opening his first Richmond exhibition, “James Prosek: Real & Imagined” at the Reynolds Gallery. “It’s just there. To me, the trout is the perfect form and color.”

Like photographer Ansel Adams in his zeal to champion and protect the pristine western landscape, Prosek is giving trout a new lease on life as a conservationist. He has produced nine books, beginning with “Trout: An Illustrated History” when he was a Yale University undergraduate, to call attention to their endangerment. He has founded a conservation initiative, World Trout, to raise money to preserve trout waters.

Prosek the painter is commanding increasing attention here and elsewhere. The Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, which recently bought a mammoth sailfish painting by Prosek for its permanent collection, is planning a Prosek exhibition for 2012.

At his simplest in the 17-work Reynolds Gallery array created this year, Prosek paints trout or other fish realistically in profile. The watercolor, often



“Brown Trout with Colorado Columbine,” 2009, watercolor, gouache, colored pencil and graphite on tea-stained paper, 45½ x 56 inches.

augmented with gouache, graphite and colored pencil, is applied to paper stained with tea or beet juice. The fish occupies the top half. Below it and in much smaller scale are representations of flowers on one side and butterflies, insects or other creatures on the opposite side.

Those paintings constitute the “real” in the show’s title. The “imagined” refers to paintings that Prosek calls hybrids. In “Sea Pegasus (Nocturne),” for example, a seemingly bejeweled seahorse sprouts wings while perched on a plant. “Parrotfish” is part bird, part fish. The fish in “Twilight Sailfish,” which measures 90 inches wide, flies high on bird wings.

“The hybrids, because they’re imag-

“JAMES PROSEK: REAL & IMAGINED”

Where: Reynolds Gallery, 1514 W. Main St.

When: Through Dec. 22

Price range: \$5,000 to \$18,000

Info: www.reynoldsgallery.com;

(804) 355-6553

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ined, have more of a conceptual underpinning,” Prosek said. “There are more ideas behind them. Maybe they use more of the artist and rely less on reality.”

Prosek, a largely self-taught artist who majored in English at Yale, has carved in wood and stone and painted in oil. But he always returns to watercolor, which he calls his “default me-

dium.”

“Watercolor is a very sensitive medium to express the beauty of nature,” he says. “Nature is ephemeral. It doesn’t last long. It comes and goes, and watercolor is a medium that expresses this. We see nature in glimpses, and watercolor captures the nature of what we see better than oil, which is opaque.”

He sees his work in personal terms, especially the placement of a large fish at the top of the “real” paintings and the much smaller representations of flora and fauna near the bottom corners.

“I’m creating triangles with the large objects and the smaller objects, and triangles are classical,” he said. “The disparity in scale implies a hierarchy in nature, which is mine. These are very personal pictures. To someone else, the flower might be the most important.”

Prosek, who has fished trout streams around the world, leaves no doubt about the direction of his conservation mission through World Trout, which has raised about \$400,000 so far.

“Some of the trout populations in streams I fish have apparently disappeared because of the overuse of water and over-fishing and the building of dams.”

His artistic direction, however, is far from clear.

“I could go in a different direction, but it would always be about our relationship with nature,” Prosek said. “The fun — and the anxiety — of making art is the mystery of not knowing what will come next. Art, for me, is about embracing the unknown and making order out of it.”

• Roy Proctor, a freelance writer and theater director, retired in 2004 as the art and theater writer for The Times-Dispatch. He can be reached at royproctor@aol.com.