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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 Amer-

ica'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 >



Left to right: *Development Strategy* (1996, 30"x22") and *Dialogue* (1996, 60"x40"), 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 stiff"

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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