

## The Crier Wild Things

In 1833, John James Audubon tried to paint a golden eagle, but he had trouble killing the bird. The explorer, classifier and sometimes-artist tried electricity and poisonous smoke, but to no avail; he finally succeeded in sticking the bird through the heart with a straight piece of steel. 179 years later, in *New York* magazine, the painter [Walton Ford](#) described wanting to make a response painting. "My picture will have the eagle trying to escape, the fox trap on its leg, this horrible burning smoke coming out of its mouth. It'll be thinking, *Like, what the fuck do I have to do to get away from this asshole?*"

As a painter of birds and animals whose work also challenges imperialism, it comes as no surprise that Ford has a complicated relationship with Audubon, the first person to sketch and categorize the birds of the "new" continent. While most of Ford's work is a sardonic conversation with Audubon and other 19th-century naturalists-slash-exploiters, the painting, *Delirium* (2004), inspired by this incident is one of the few explicitly Audubon-focused narratives in Ford's body of work. Another is *Sensations of an Infant Heart*, which references a terrifying childhood memory of Audubon's, in which a monkey from his mother's menagerie strangled his favorite parrot.

Ford doesn't have to be in direct dialogue with America's most famous "naturalist" to fill his canvases with tortured and beset creatures of all shapes and sizes. Take *Nila* (1999-2000). Organized into 22 different small paintings, each with their own distinctive rectangular shape, it depicts Nila, an Indian elephant, under siege. Birds perch on every part of him. A rooster balances on her sawed-off tusk. An owl crouches on his shoulder blades. A turkey vulture sits on his rump. A flock of European starlings ride him like barnacles on a whale. Two couple on his distended, grotesque penis. And along the bottom of the painting run the scientific names of the bird and animal actors, in Ford's spidery handwriting.

*Nila* is an indisputedly sublime painting, inducing terror and glee. Terror, in the romantic sublime sense of terror, because of the emphatically convincing and concrete quality of Ford's draftsmanship, the dazzle of Nila's corrugated trunk and the gloss of the birds' haughty feathers. Glee, in the childlike sense, because of the superabundance of detail, the giddy realization that creeps over the viewer that each of the panels is separate, and separately named ("Nostalgia," "Crack of Dawn," "Premonitions of Midnight," "The Abbe's Revenge"), as she revels in the delight of spindly drawings and notations on empty spaces that hold even more mysteries. This is the glee of the archivist, or the curious kid who just read a bunch of Nancy Drews and is now poking around in her grandma's attic, about to pull out the box of old yellow letters--a clue.

*Nila*, like all of Ford's paintings, is narrative. The 46-year-old Ford majored in film at the Rhode Island School of Design, but has said he had trouble finding his voice in that medium. Instead, as he says in his book, *Tigers of Wrath, Horses of Instruction*, he "went home every day and painted and didn't get college credit for it." His animal paintings as a whole form a story cycle of exploitation--human on animal, human on human, sometimes animal on animal.

Audubon is not the only 19th-century naturalist Ford targets for criticism. His other favorites include Sir Richard Burton, the British adventurer and translator of the *Arabian Nights*, and Carl Akeley, the American taxidermist and animal harvester who accumulated most of New York's Museum of Natural History's taxidermy collection. The lives of both Burton and Akeley exemplify quasi-tawdry Victorianess. You can see why Ford would be

into messing with these men, who believed so much in their own right--nay, duty--to discover and harvest other people's fauna. Akeley, who pioneered modern taxidermy by figuring out how to make a mold of an animal's body and stretch skin over it, is said to have once killed a leopard with his bare hands, and died of a very nineteenth-century fever while on a collecting trip for mountain gorillas. Burton, a man of many interesting obsessions, once disguised himself in order to see inside Mecca; visited and wrote about the Mormon settlement in Utah; and engaged in an ambitious expedition to find the source of the Nile River. In *The Forsaken* (1999), Ford depicts a golden languor monkey that Burton kept from one of his journeys and called his "wife"--he even gave her a pair of pearl earrings. Ford's work explores that place where Burton and Akeley lived, and where the classifying impulse overlaps with the desire to possess as one's own.

Ford's stories are not only about human power over animals; his animals act on each other, violently and sexually. (In this, too, he is heir to Audubon, who painted that golden eagle with a slain rabbit in its talons.) Sometimes Ford seems motivated by sheer defiance; he wants to contradict the pastoral ideal of traditional landscapes, the picturesque harmony of, say, Edward Hicks's *Peaceable Kingdom* paintings. Instead of the lion laying down with the lamb, we have a dromedary crouching in the desert, alive, but with Egyptian vultures hunched on her back; or a caracal sinking its teeth into the neck of an ibis. *Chingado* (1998) comes at you from both directions--a jaguar has a death grip on the jugular of a zebu, but on second look, the zebu is copulating with the jaguar. Hence, the title.

Ford's paintings often require these kinds of closer looks, to either decipher all the action or simply soak in all the detail. He casts his animals as actors in 19th century human dramas. In *Benjamin's Emblem* (2000), a wild, brightly colored red, green and blue turkey fills the frame, a smaller bird pinned in its ugly claw as he stares at the viewer with an evil eye. Ford subtitled the painting "With a true original native," a reference to the smaller bird, a Carolina parakeet, which later became extinct. Both the background--an early American plantation-style house lit up in a blood-red sunset--and the text, which recaps some of Franklin's classic character-building maxims, make clear that Ford is using the turkey to make a point about the expansionist American project. The dominant figure in *N.G.O. Wallahs*, which also takes colonialism as its subject is an Indian marabout, who stands astride a group of smaller birds. These small birds are clustered on a Hershey's Kisses bag, as a European starling passes out the chocolate candies, symbolizing the dependency and complicity that Ford sees as the colonial legacy.

In almost all of his paintings, Ford paints this European starling, a bird which, according to him, stands for "my Western interlopers." "The starling has the same natural history that we do," he explains in the interview with Dodie Kazanjian that appears in his book. "It's a European bird that was exported around the world, and I'm interested in using it as a stand-in for myself, or for Western attempts to influence global events." Often, indeed, Ford's starlings are places they shouldn't be--underfoot when the vultures attack the dromedary, flocked around the caracal as it strikes at the neck of the ibis.

These explicitly colonial paintings require animals to stand in for human follies, actors in a play they don't understand. In some paintings Ford's animals remind one of the Weimaraners in a Wegman print--they don't have a cigar and a deck of cards, and they're not wearing funny hats, but they might as well be. The aggressive symbolism of his critique dulls the message, and dilutes its impact.

A far more interesting strain in Ford's paintings is the examination of our nostalgic impulse toward the ecosystem of the 19th century. As Ford acknowledges, some of the horror we feel at Audubon's hunting methods comes from our inability to imagine the world in which he lived. That was a world of openness and possibility (at least for the privileged, Anglo male side that Audubon found himself on). Ford's paintings are the strongest when he

more else that Audubon found himself on). Ford's paintings are the strongest when he directly acknowledges his conflicted relationship and his fascination with that world.

In Ford's *Falling Bough* (2002), a giant bough is covered in passenger pigeons, fighting, breeding, eating, feathers flying. These passenger pigeons, which are now extinct, once filled the forests of America in such giant flocks that nobody could believe that they would ever vanish. A contemporary observer of the flocks wrote, "Imagine a thousand threshing machines accompanied by as many steamboats with an equal quota of R.R. trains passing through covered bridges and you possibly have a faint conception of the terrific roar following the monstrous black cloud of pigeons as they passed in rapid flight." Audubon himself compared the effect of proximity to the pigeons as making one feel as though he was at a "hard gale at sea." The disgusting fullness, this distended, engorged visual mass, is only more shocking for being done in watercolor, that least dense of media. The mass of birds clings to the giant bough, suspended impossibly in the sky, the rest of the flock scattered like wallpaper.

Audubon didn't let his financial woes or marital spats interfere with his enjoyment of the frontier. Blissfully happy, a hero on a mission, he was a nature lover in the ultimate unexplored playground. Of his life in frontier Louisville, Kentucky in 1808, Audubon wrote, "I shot, I drew, I looked on nature only; my days were happy beyond human conception, and beyond this I really cared not."

To love nature in 1808 was not to campaign against DDT, to dream of a world untouched by human stain. It was to venture into that world, to chart it, to map it, to conquer it. That was love. As Ford said of Audubon, "He made enemies everywhere he went. He was repulsed by Native Americans. He shot many more birds than he studied."

If he shot more birds than he studied, perhaps it was because there was so many to be shot. Abundance and possibility are everywhere in Audubon's diary. Of a trip he took accompanied by Shawnee Indians in 1810, Audubon describes a vision of a lake filled with trumpeter swans: "When the lake burst on our view there were the swans by the hundreds, and white as rich cream, either dipping their black bills in the water, or stretching out one leg on its surface, or gently floating along." Of the Kentucky Barrens in 1811 he wrote, "Flowers without number ... sprung up amidst the luxuriant grass; the fields, the orchards, and the gardens of the settlers, presented an appearance of plenty, scarcely anywhere exceeded; the wild fruit-trees, having their branches interlaced with grapevines, promised a rich harvest, and at every step I trod on ripe and fragrant strawberries."

Ripe and fragrant strawberries are nice, but one can't help but assume Ford, with his penchant for the macabre, would be more interested in the trip that Audubon took between the old French Colonial town Ste. Genevieve, Missouri and his home in Henderson, Kentucky, during which his horse died after buffalo gnats drained it completely of its blood.

Ford inverts the abundance of the 19th century, and turns it into something grotesque, something not quite earthly. But he isn't immune to the charms of Audubon's world. "I would give anything to see Manhattan Island as Henry Hudson saw it, to see it when it was covered with forest and streams and fragrant flowers and Indians," he says in *Tigers of Wrath, Horses of Instruction*. "I would have loved to see the passenger pigeons." Thankfully for us, this push-pull, love-hate relationship complicates and greatly enriches his work.

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