

Tigers of Wrath

Watercolors by Walton Ford

Walton Ford's art is a study in contradictions. Although he uses materials most often associated with small, intimate works—watercolor, gouache, graphite, and ink—his paintings are often enormous. His attention to intricate detail and his bewitching technical mastery result in stunning images, but upon close examination, these attractive scenes frequently reveal a repulsive world of ugly brutality. The themes seem to be drawn from nature, but they are also about history, politics, and culture. “The main thing I'm always looking for in my work is a sort of attraction/repulsion,” Ford explains, “where the stuff is beautiful to begin with until you notice some horrible violence is about to happen in the middle of the happening. Often that can be the moment when an animal is defined by and enters human culture.”

Ford invites us to view his subject matter through an art historical lens. The most striking feature of his work is its resemblance to John James Audubon's well-known series *Birds of America*, first published in 1840. Ford mimics not only Audubon's style but also the handwritten notes he often incorporated in his paintings. The satirical edge Ford adds recalls artists such as Pieter Brueghel the Elder (Dutch, circa 1525–1569), J. J. Granville (French, 1803–1847), and Robert Crumb (American, born 1943).

The artist's watercolors are layered with influences and ideas. His work celebrates a kind of wonder resulting from thorough research, as indicated by his book-strewn studio, where one might find an instruction book for nineteenth-century trappers, a Swiss zookeeper's manual, or a translation of a Sanskrit elephant-training manuscript. If we knew all of the stories behind Ford's grand images, we could read the pictures like novels. Yet Ford would have us liken his paintings to dreams in which we have a general idea of what occurred but the interpretation escapes us. In some instances in the exhibition, sources that inspired the artist have been cited so that the viewer can try to unlock the underlying meaning of an image. But one need not attempt to decipher the deeper intentions of these works; we can simply admire them for their elegance. Searching for the meaning of these paintings, after all, can be similar to what Audubon experienced in trying to catch a glimpse of the now extinct passenger pigeon:

When an individual is seen gliding through the woods and close to the observer, it passes like a thought, and on trying to see it again, the eye searches in vain; the bird is gone.

Marilyn S. Kushner
Curator of Prints, Drawings, and Exhibitions

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