Walton Ford

Cruel & Unusual

Following his recent New York exhibition, Artist Profile surveys the work of celebrated American painter Walton Ford.

IT IS INEVITABLE, a scene points to a wildlife documentary teaches us that an animal or two will end up dead, dispersed by a predator in the name of survival. Many viewers recoil at the brutality of nature but, for American artist Walton Ford, these cruel events are the impetus for creating monumental paintings. His depictions of nature are not so much on the notion of the survival of the fittest, but are also focused on the intervention and impact of man on animal environments.

Born in upstate New York in 1960, from a young age Ford imagined himself as an amateur naturalist. Seated firmly at the kitchen table, the young Ford spent hours drawing animals and copying images from strange and obscure books on the natural world. To this day, his ideas and images are derived from the strange and unusual stories found in those books, working not so much as a illustrator of stories but a story re-teller through his paintings.

Ford’s works are big, bold and bold, and almost exclusively vertetables, gnawers and take, allowing him to mimic field notes and journal entries. He has expressed a desire to make the biggest watercolors in history and, over the past ten years, has probably come pretty close. The ambitious dimensions of his works are not attempted just for the sake of size, rather according to Ford, they are about depicting animals in accurate scale and borne of a desire to emulate the experience of nature in the raw or the more inspiring dilemmas of natural history museums.

His paintings are packed with cryptic references, often humorous, and provided by Ford to help the viewer unravel the mystery contained within. Ford himself states he provides substantial information, quoted as saying,

"God damn, I’ve given you everything! After that, if the viewer doesn’t get it, that is their problem." These clues are delivered in various forms, text is scrambled on the painting to resemble field notes or early naturalism, and the depiction of the animal world colliding with politics and culture. The large watercolors explore the evil side of man but rarely depict man. When they do, the human figure is secondary to the composition. Man has been subdued with an attention range of animals, which are not situations that could be perceived as clearly resembling human more than animal behavior.

Walton Ford describes his imagery as a gift and rooted in narratives about colonization. He believes most animal pictures from colonial sources are laden with metaphor and symbolism, a belief that underpins the imagery he chooses when making works. To add weight to his dramatic depictions of the natural world is his intentional mimicking in style and character of the art of the famous nineteenth-century American artist and naturalist, John James Audubon, to extend this paradox to artificial aging of his paper, encouraging notions of time but without a concern coming to the rescue. However, while Audubon concentrated on the natural world, preserving portraits and images of animals who knew no better, Ford gives contemporary audiences a surrealistic vision of a world where nature is taken for granted.

In conversations about his work, Ford appears in two minds about the simplified violence of nature, having said: "One big thing I am looking at in my work is this attraction and repulsion.”

One painting that provided Ford with inspiration for a major work was that of the English explorer, scholar, ornithologist, and spy Sir Richard Burton. According to the story books, during his visit to the Great Britain
kept 40 monkeys around the barracks to study them, learning 16 words of monkey speak. He dressed them in human clothes and made each monkey play a different role: the wife, the doctor, the secretary and so on. Ford has taken this story and compressed it into a very large watercolour embracing the senses and many other aspects that have been gleaned lovingly from Sir Richard's colourful history.

Another story referenced by Ford, in this case for his etching Lined Blossoms, was the practice of lining particular flowers with Birdlime, a sticky paste. It was applied to the inside of the flower and, when a hummingbird would poke its beak in to get the nectar, its head would become stuck; it would suffocate and die. The hunter would collect the body at the end of the day. The depiction of this act is sharply detailed and strange. On viewing the work it takes some time to work out what is happening but the strange sense of something being wrong is immediate.

Walton Ford has some traditional approaches to his work practice. His background research involves endless visits to natural history museums. His days consist of trawling through filing cabinets bulging with photos, examining hundreds of stuffed specimens and hunting the dioramas that provide references for his figural compositions. He is constantly drawing, continuing his childhood passion as he fills his sketchbooks with information that in turn provides imagery for his compositions.

In his most recent exhibition in New York at Paul Kasmin Gallery, Ford has produced a new body of monumental, riveting works. The highlight of the exhibition for me is Loss of the Lisbon Rhinoceros. This painting is based on the story of a rhinoceros that died aboard a ship that was carrying the animal from Lisbon as a gift for Pope Leo X. This story was later told to the artist Albrecht Dürer, along with a description of the beast. In response, Dürer produced a woodcut of the rhino in 1515 that is still arguably the most celebrated depiction of a rhino. Ford presents us with a large work depicting the rhino trapped on the deck of the ship on that faceless voyage to Lisbon. The sails are torn and the water floods the deck, swirling madly around the rhino's feet. Even if you weren't privy to the story you get a strong sense that the armoured one is doomed. History gave us the story. Dürer provided Ford with the inspired image and Ford in turn gives us that moment that Dürer was not priviliged to witness. His works are powerful, curious, thought provoking and beautifully executed. For Ford, it is this foundation in history and attention to execution that is at the centre of his work. "People are suspicious of craftsmanship, but at the end of the day the only thing that human beings have to feel proud about is what sort of art did that culture leave behind, what sort of music, food, creativity, writing, the objects they made. That's the value and legacy that will endure."