

Walton Ford

Contemporary art is a world known for its diversity of genre. It is a world that welcomes different approaches, ambitions, and styles. There have been numerous artists who embrace a given movement because it was popular, very few, however, have chosen the path that Walton Ford has taken. He brings together his interest for natural history and historic events by creating over-size watercolours featuring animals. These paintings make for a rich narrative, where historical facts are interwoven with dreams, fantasies, and nightmares.

Walton Ford's (b. 1960 in the United States) most recent project is a book entitled *Walton Ford: Pancha Tantra* – based on the ancient Indian book of fables collected from 3rd-5th BC. With a limited edition of 1,500 copies, the book is an in depth exploration of his oeuvre. In this interview he discusses his work and the making of *Pancha Tantra* with the Asian Art Newspaper.



AAN: You refer to the naturalist Audubon as an inspiration. Has the artist Alfred Kubin's work also influenced you?

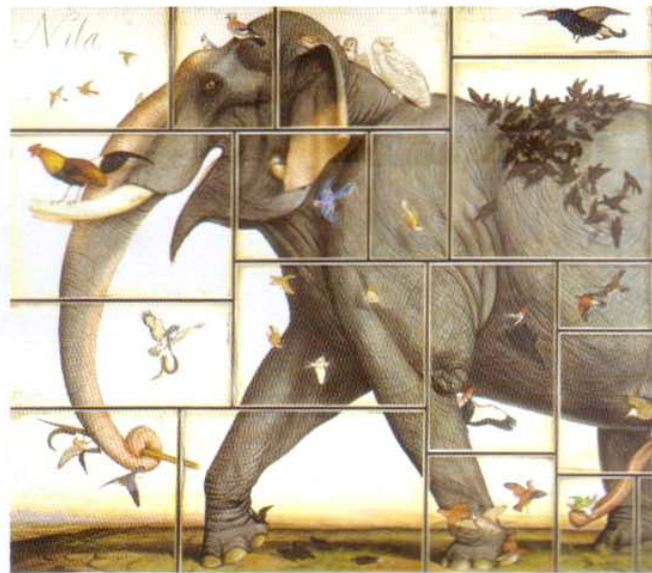
WF: I look at these things, but they have less of a direct impact on what I am trying to do. My focus has narrowed in a sense. The work of artists like Kubin is extremely surreal, dreamlike, and the imagery is (I believe) more personal, less based on historic events. I am terribly interested in historical imagery with the work based on something that I have read, say a myth, or a cultural reference. With somebody like Kubin, I think he is more interested in the subconscious, and trying to find some truth in there. What I do like and what I am influenced by is the idea that you can make a picture that has its own interior logic, yet its own visual language is cryptic. What I love about Kubin or a contemporary artist like Matthew Barney is that they create their own visual language. I frequently do that, too. Often, my paintings have a symbolic meaning: a series of symbols that are sometimes only known to me. They are always based on historic research work, or something that is true. For example, I painted a Vietnamese tiger – part of the history of Vietnam's struggle with its enemies. It is a Vietnamese tiger and in the stripes of the tiger are over 30 or 40 human figures – all figures from Vietnamese history showing their struggle against the Chinese, the French, and the Americans. It is a sort of allegory of how the tiger got its stripes, which in Vietnam's version of the old folktale says it is about a farmer who ties the tiger up and then sets a fire. The fire burns the stripes into him, and from then on the tiger had black stripes. It is like war for me, and this is how the Vietnamese tiger got his stripes from the Chinese, the French, and the Americans tying him up and setting fire on him, and then letting him loose. All of the stripes contain little silhouettes of all these different figures who have been burned into the tiger forever. That becomes my own truth. The narrative is inside the picture.

AAN: Considering the scale of your pieces, why choose watercolour over oils?

WF: Watercolour is a medium that is much more difficult than oil painting. Every mark you make with watercolour is final, whereas oil painters can scratch things out and paint over things they have done before. With watercolour, I have to plan everything ahead of time. Everything is clear in my mind before I do it and has to be done right the first time. I feel very strongly that this is truly a very difficult project. For the natural history artists like Audubon or Edward Lear, both of whom travelled extensively, watercolour



CONDEMNED (2006), six copper plates, hardground etching, aquatint, spit bite aquatint, drypoint, scraping and burnishing on Rives paper, 54.3 x 40 cm. sheet, 30.5 x 22.9 cm



NILA (1999-2000), watercolour, gouache, ink and pencil on paper, 365.8 x 548.6 cm

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was the digital camera of the age. A way of grabbing and recording information. Artists would then take these watercolours back to their studios and make their oils or lithographs from their sketches. This would give them time to put their cultural assumptions in, and to change the narrative. I did not want to use that historic language because painters in the West who made these kind of studies would have been going back home to make a reputation for themselves as salon painters. Consequently, I only use watercolour. I amplify it and bring it up to the level of fresco and say 'here is a piece of natural history story that I think is of great importance'. In addition, I hope that I am making you see it in a new way.

AAN : You have a unique style within the contemporary art world. Were you initially discouraged to pursue your work or did you get support from the beginning?

WF: I was discouraged for a while as initially there was no real place for me in the art world. When I arrived in New York around 1982, I was a contemporary of Basquiat and Keith Haring, and their work certainly had nothing to do with what I was doing. There was tremendous focus on what they were doing. There was the feeling of working on the fringes and being very good at what I did. Then I was encouraged by the success of John Currin and Alexis Rothman, who completed works that were related to what I was doing. I was painting and exhibiting, but the others were doing a little bit better at getting attention. I nevertheless kept going because I was immersed in what I was doing, and as I started to have my first reviews following an exhibition at Paul Kasmin's, the audience began to know and appreciate my work. That was my major encouragement and it all went on from there.

OLIVIA SAND

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