

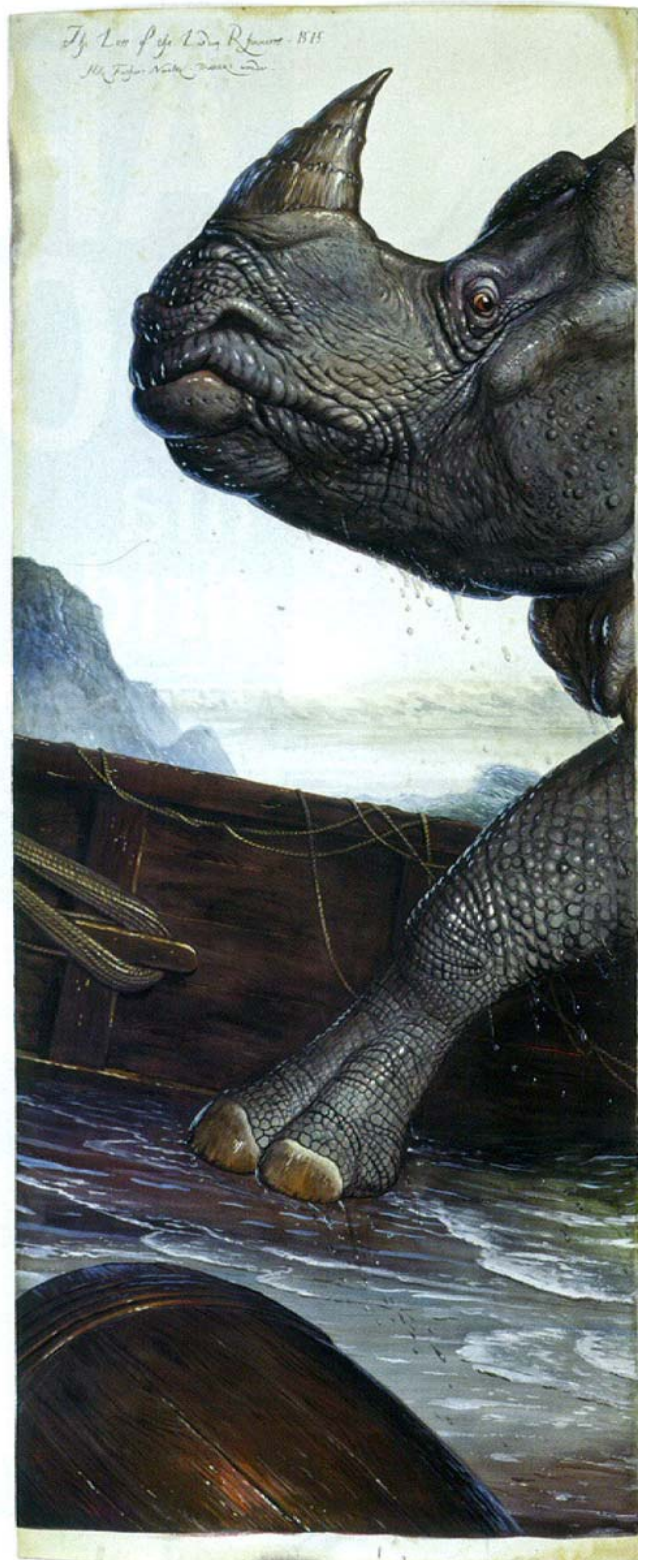
King of the Beasts

Chained to the deck of a sinking galleon, the massive straining beast in Walton Ford's triptych *Loss of the Lisbon Rhinoceros* (2008) is among the most sublime of the many creatures he has painted. With a taste for perverse natural history anecdotes and a penchant for hyperbolic fantasy, Ford is an animalier for our era of bio-apocalypse—and a worthy heir to J.J. Audubon, J.J. Grandville, Edward Lear and Carl E. Akeley, dioramist of the American Museum of Natural History in New York, among the antecedents he frequently cites. In Ford's recent exhibition at Paul Kasmin Gallery in New York, the rhino shared walls with an extinct bull, the European aurochs, likewise depicted in a three-panel watercolor some 8 feet high and 13 feet wide, stamping his hooves in a snowy landscape littered with human bones. Ford's animals come large, and he always positions them front and center, making them especially startling. The biggest one, at 12 by 19 feet, is a 22-panel elephant (Nila, 1999-2000), and Ford says that soon he will paint a whale.

In 1997, working in the manner he had developed in his earlier watercolors of birds, faux-foxing the surface and adding inscriptions in an antiquated cursive to give them the quality of pages from old natural history books, Ford made the first of his to-scale images of quadrupeds, *Thanh Hoang*. This is a Vietnamese tiger that in Ford's version is marked by stripes forming silhouettes of historical figures. Ford never shows his beasts apart from human culture, whether triumphing over it temporarily or succumbing to it in tragic defeat. A grizzly comes upon a human corpse in a hollow log; a polar bear roars above a vanitas of skull, hourglass and playing cards caught in the permafrost. A doomed buffalo bloodies some marauding wolves in a French formal garden; a sick monkey expires in a satin-upholstered chaise longue. Like Audubon, Ford moved from birds, which he continues to depict, to mammals. Particularly disturbing is *Falling Bough* (2002), in which a huge branch is so heavily laden with passenger pigeons engaging in all manner of grotesque habits—shades of Bosch and Brueghel—that it breaks off the tree and hurtles through the air. Only through such a phantasm could Ford capture the hallucinatory power of Audubon's written account of the extinct North American species, which at its peak, during the continent's colonization, numbered in the billions.

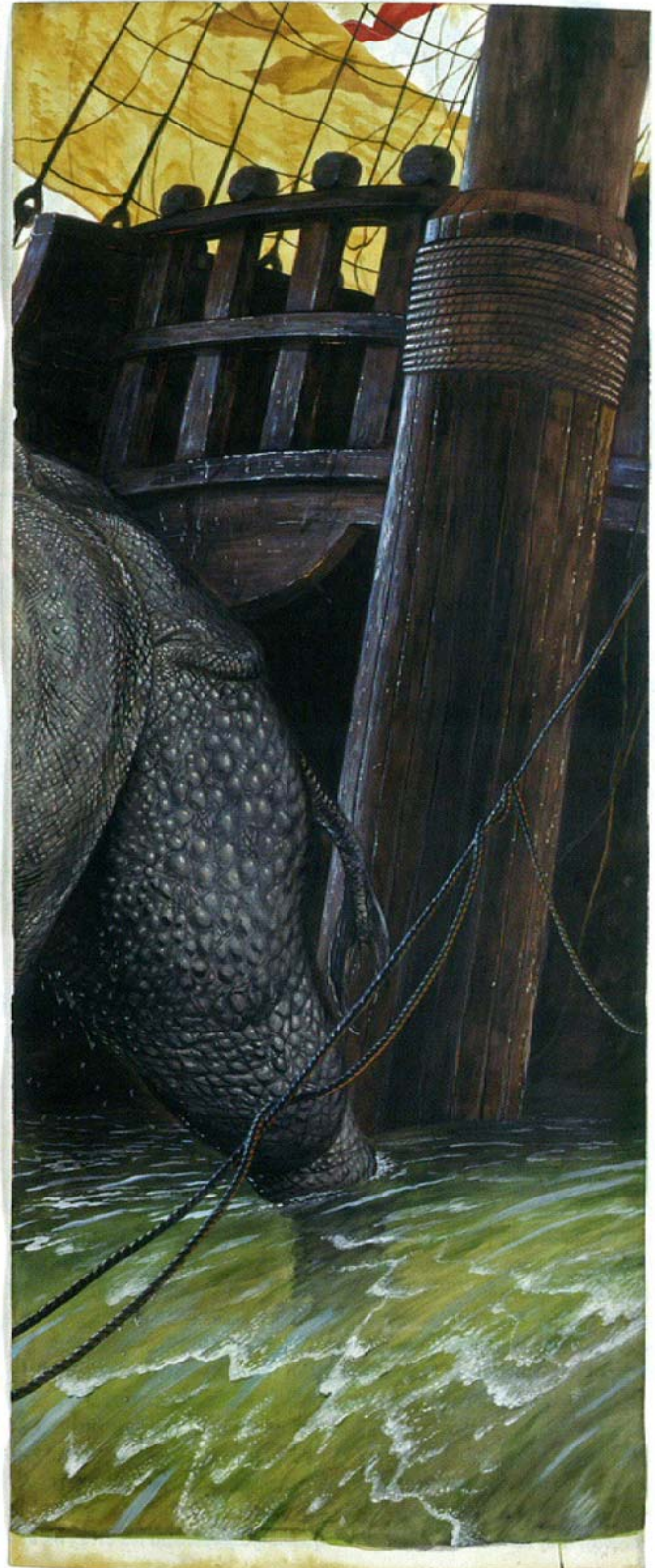
"What it portends, I know not," reads a wondering inscription in the margin of *Falling Bough*. It is a quote about the vast flocks of the birds by Thomas Dudley, a 17th-century governor of Massachusetts, and is one of myriad inscriptions that appeared in Ford's work until a few years ago. In his 2006-07 retrospective of some 50 watercolors from the previous 10 years, these impressively researched texts were peered at closely by visitors seeking clues to the content of images so immediately gratifying yet so unsettling. The exhibition is past, but a new publication by Taschen, *Pancha Tantra*, surveys Ford's work in a limited edition volume whose ambitious scale (320 pages, 19½ by 14¾ inches, with 16 gatefolds) is reminiscent of Audubon's famous double-elephant folio, *Birds of America* (1827-38). In *Pancha Tantra* one can see how, over time, Ford has reduced the quantity of written matter—quotes from literature and natural history, snippets about economics, Latin classifications—in his work. Now he mostly allows the elements of the scenarios to speak for themselves, from carefully observed fur, scales and feathers to dramatic poses and narrative devices. I met the 48-year-old artist—a keen and voluble raconteur—at the Kasmin exhibition in June.

Walton Ford: *Loss of the Lisbon Rhinoceros*, 2008,
98¾ by 148¾ inches. All works this article watercolor,
gouache, ink and pencil on paper.



In his life-size watercolors of animals, Walton Ford fashions allegories about the violence and destruction attending human civilization.

INTERVIEW BY FAYE HIRSCH





Scipio and the Bear, 2007, 59½ by 119½ inches.

Faye Hirsch: Maybe we could begin by talking a bit about *Pancho Tantra*. What really struck me about the book is its scale, which is reminiscent of the Audubon folio. You must have thought about that a little.

Walton Ford: Benedikt Taschen [the publisher] thought of it. Taschen kind of jump-started this idea of these megasized limited edition books. They've been accused sometimes of doing them gratuitously, for money—that the splashiness or the outrageousness of it isn't always warranted by the subject matter. In this case, it was completely justified. Scale is so critical to my process. But also—the idea of museums, the idea of dioramas, of giant natural history libraries that go on and on and on, of going through musty archives and all that. You had to get that feeling from the book without losing sight of the fact that it was contemporary art. I didn't want to make a fake-artifact book. It's a fine line to walk. You don't want it to be just theatrical; you want it to have something to do with your processes and what you're trying to say.

As soon as Benedikt saw my work, he understood exactly. And the book kept growing the more he knew about the work; he understood we had to make something unusually large and elaborate, and reminiscent of these early books. He had done a Peter Beard book that had a similar feel in terms of the binding and the way it was put together. He went a little further with mine in terms of these large foldouts and huge details.

FH: Have you ever been able to sit with one of the big Audubon books?

WF: Yes, I have. Also other natural history books that are put together in a similar way. There's the *Description of Egypt* [1809] that Napoleon Bonaparte commissioned. They have a copy of that at the Explorers Club, of which I'm a member—though I haven't been anywhere! I mean, not really. I've traveled, backpacking style, like the Lonely Planet, but I've never done anything that would qualify as an expedition as far as the Explorers Club is concerned. They've had plenty of photographers in the club, but not that many painters who tap into the history of natural history art the way that I do. Carl Akeley [1864-1926], who designed the Natural History Museum dioramas and was a great artist—the background paintings that he commissioned for the museum are all hanging in the Explorers Club. And those things are an enormous inspiration to me. I've been looking at his dioramas ever since I was a kid. So for me to arrive at that club and see them was a thrill.

Anyway, they have a copy of the *Description of Egypt*, and it's every bit as

big and elaborate as the Audubon book. Americans, because we have Audubon, tend to imagine that those are sort of the ultimate natural history books. But really they're part of a tradition. Edward Lear was every bit as accomplished a natural history artist as Audubon, but he didn't have the focus. See, the great thing about Audubon was, he didn't have very much talent, but with his enormous drive and energy he was able to accomplish something that was quite spectacular.

FH: I started reading Audubon after seeing your work.

WF: His stuff is amazing, and it's disturbing—a lot more disturbing than you would think.

FH: It's not so much that he did these cruel things; it's the combination of his amazing description and his love of what he was doing, at the same time that you feel he understood that so much was being lost.

WF: He could see it was being lost, but he kind of flip-flopped back and forth between the idea of progress and a sort of hate for nature. He felt that the romanticizing of Indians was foolish; he thought that George Catlin was an idiot for thinking that there was any such thing as a noble savage.

FH: He'll go through a very loving description of a bird and describe what he's doing with it, and then at the very end there will be something cruel . . .

WF: Or bizarre. Like the turkey vultures, where he's trying to find out how they find their prey, so he's like putting their eyes out and then putting dead things in front of them to find out, Do they see it?

FH: They smell it, right? In interviews, it seems you don't want people to think you're some kind of environmentalist—but it's as if you just don't want these animals to be victims.

WF: Well, I want to tell their story on some level—whether it's a narrative imposed from outside or their own story. The two big pieces in the Kasmin show are from those different points of view. The aurochs, for example [*Tur*, 2007], is an animal that went extinct before it could be described—how it behaved or what it did, what kind of life it lived. It was the first animal that was ever painted by a human being. It's the bull that you see in the Hall of Bulls at Lascaux. This bovine was the prototype—the primal bull that all cows are descended from. The animal today that is probably closest to it in DNA is the fighting bull of Spain. What we know from the fossil evidence is that the things were like 6 feet tall at the shoulder—just what I painted. They were

“What is it like, if you’re a black bear in 1820, and you have the misfortune of coming across Audubon?”

enormous! The last ones were killed in the 17th century—but throughout, they were completely defined by their role in human culture. There’s some kind of magic going on in prehistoric art with these bulls.

FH: By magic, you mean that’s why they painted them?

WF: They’re not sure, but the bulls were painted in kind of a compulsive way. That’s a whole other story. Let’s just say they were very important images, these bulls. And Julius Caesar, when he invades Germany he takes note of these animals. He says they are without a doubt the most terrifying animals he’s ever seen. He says they’re fast, they’re as big as elephants, they’re completely mean and furious all the time. They won’t suffer any other animal around them without attacking, and they’ve got these tremendous horns. And he gave credit to the Gauls that he was slaughtering by saying that they hunt them and make cups out of their horns.

Now, to hunt the aurochs in prehistoric times, you had to organize. You couldn’t just hunt them by yourself. And once you start to organize you have a leader, and once you have a leader he’s saying, I get a bigger share. And you get political structures going. So it’s possible that the monarchies of Europe came out of the hunting of this bull. In some ways it’s the most important human/animal interaction in Western culture. The aurochs were in the Polish forests in medieval times and on through the Renaissance, and only the nobility

aurochs that the Nazis would have wanted and didn’t get. It’s the ultimate status symbol of a Fascist, coming out of a Caspar Friedrich-like forest into a snowy landscape of people who have been broken on the wheel in the background, and shreds of human beings in the snow. I’m posing it in a super-muscular Leni Riefenstahl kind of attitude. And the aurochs is a Nazi.

FH: Could you talk about the way you set up the narrative in *Scipio and the Bear* [2007], which is based on a famous essay by Audubon?

WF: A farmer sends his servant to Audubon, when Audubon is traveling. They want him to help clear out some bears who have been eating the corn. And they go out on this rampage one night, and they kill all these bears. They run them up trees, they set fire to trees, they cut down trees that have bears in them, and they let the dogs kill the bears. They set fires in the cornfields. There are descriptions of slaves battling the bears barehanded. Between the fires and the horsemen and the slaves and the bears that were being chased around, the hunt destroyed more corn than the farmer would have lost to the bears initially. The farmer must have just been sitting around after Audubon left going, Oh, what did I do? I set loose these maniacs! “To procure as much sport as possible,” is how Audubon put it.

In this case, it was very important for me to do the reverse of what I did with the aurochs—where I told it from the humans’ point of view—and tell it from the bears’ point of view.

What is it like, if you’re a black bear in 1820, and you have the misfortune of coming across Audubon?

FH: Are they cubs?

WF: Just small bears—not quite babies, but they’d still mess you up.

FH: You look at the picture, and you see the bears up close in the treetop, and you see their bellies glowing and wonder why. And then you see, in the distance, the same scene, except the whole scene, with the fires lit beneath the trees. It reminded me of Renaissance continuous narrative.

WF: Yes, absolutely. My senior year at the Rhode Island School of Design [1982], I was lucky enough to go to RISD’s palazzo in Rome. The biggest influence on me, that you can still see even in this work, was Giotto, at Assisi especially—not just Giotto but Lorenzetti and, downstairs, the St. Martin cycle by Simone Martini. This is, in my opinion, the ultimate “form-fol-



Falling Bough, 2002, 60% by 119½ inches.

could hunt them. If a peasant was caught, God forbid, putting snares in the royal hunting ground, they’d break him on the wheel or something. So what I painted was this animal arriving as a regal creature—the ultimate animal to hunt.

And there’s an epilogue to this that’s incredible. The Nazis, based on that little bit in Caesar writing about Gaul and writing about the Germans, they thought, What we need to do now is take modern cattle, and back-breed them, which is a process of trying to re-create former species. And they back-bred modern cattle and came up with something that they thought was an aurochs. It was done by the Heck brothers, who had the Berlin Zoo. And they back-bred and back-bred and back-bred and they had this thing, this ur-aurochs. Well now they’re just called Heck’s Cattle, because everyone knows from DNA research that the Nazis didn’t come up with an aurochs—it’s extinct. They just made a big ugly mean-looking slob of a bull.

So my painting is not only the last aurochs, in the regal sense. It’s the

“low-function” kind of narrative. They’re so stripped down and perfect. When those same stories are told in the High Renaissance, they are completely confused. You can’t tell what’s going on in the Sistine Chapel! You can’t tell if that’s Jonah—the whale is way the hell back there. They’re just a bunch of naked people writhing around—it’s really beautiful, very amazing, but it’s not perfect storytelling for illiterates. Which is exactly what Giotto did.

So I have two—or more—points of view that I like to take. One where the culture takes over the story, where the natural history of the moment is of no importance to me. The idea of the animal behaving in a way that is natural, or intrinsic to the animal, is bullshit. It’s all about our imposition of culture. That bit from Oscar Wilde in *The Decay of Lying*, where he talks about how nature imitates art, and not the other way around. We’re always saying, Go to nature as the great model. But he says, Don’t go to nature, go to other artists. If you want a beautiful landscape, you can’t do better than

“Watercolor, like fresco, is something that moves forward, unlike oil, where you can back

Constable. If you go out in nature, he says, things are going to be uncomfortable; they're going to be asymmetrical. They're only going to be good when they imitate art. He goes on to say, There were no fogs in London until Turner painted them.

There's so much brilliance in that, because it has to do with the way we see the world. You can't see these animals or anything without filtering them through this cultural lens, which is this very old art-historical blah blah blah. It's all theory. But I have my different approaches to the animal. With the bears, I'm trying to put you where the bears are rather than where Audubon is. But with the bull I'm putting you where the Heck brothers were, in the Berlin Zoo, trying to breed. It's their fever vision. But that doesn't have anything to do with the poor animal any more. Whereas the bears have everything to do with the poor animal and I'm trying to forget Audubon for a minute.

FH: On this point of art after art, would you talk about *Loss of the Lisbon Rhinoceros* [2008] and Dürer?

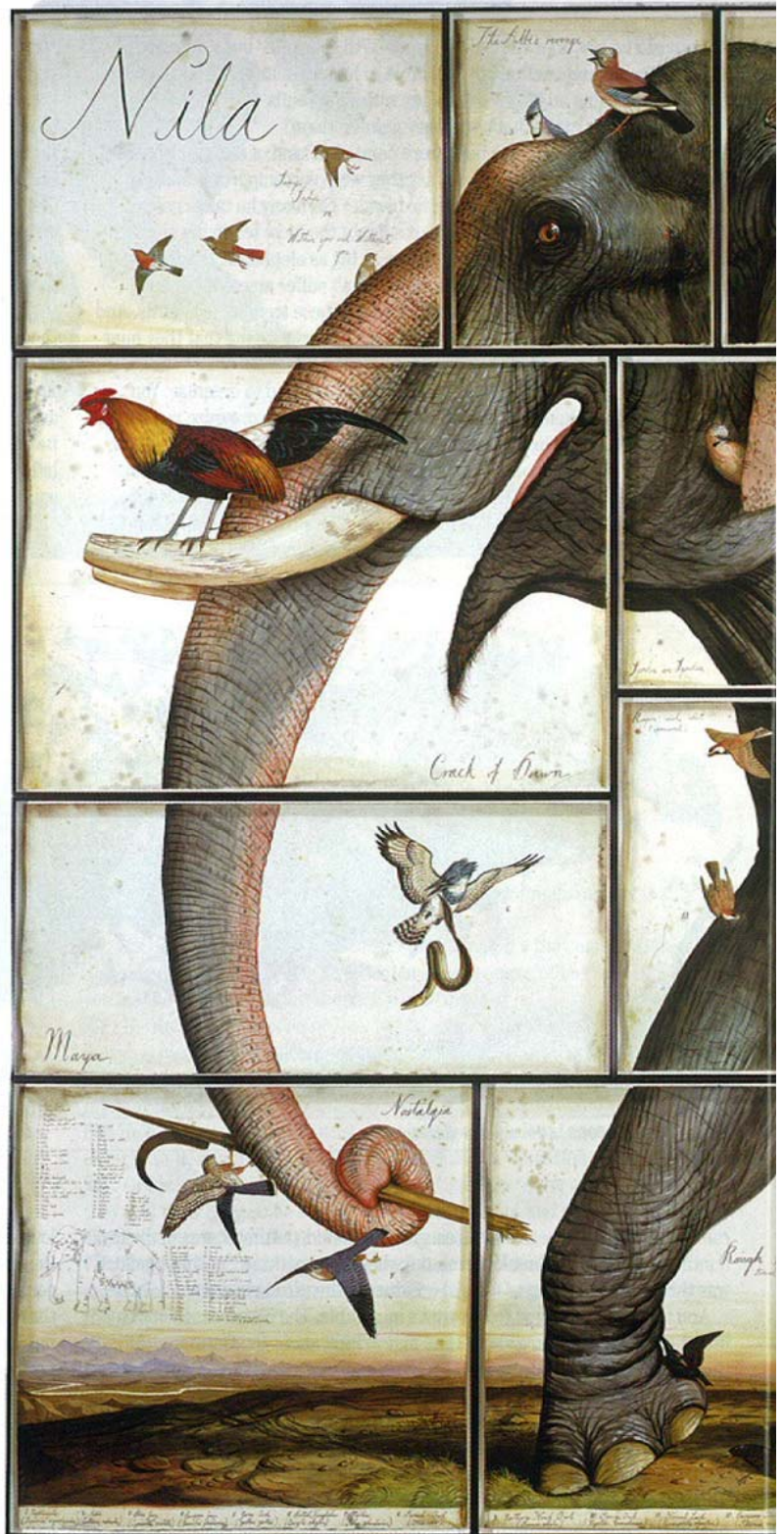
WF: The two big pieces—the aurochs and the rhinoceros—are kind of bookends to the approaches that I'm taking, though there are overlapping areas. With the rhino, the fever vision is Dürer's woodcut. The story being, in brief: The Portuguese got a rhinoceros onto a ship in 1515 and decided to send it to Lisbon for King Manuel to have. It was the first Indian rhinoceros to make it to Europe—all the way around the Cape of Good Hope to Lisbon. And then, diplomatically, Manuel decided he should give it to Pope Leo X. So they put it back in a boat, but only after Lisbon had gone nuts seeing this animal. It was a sensation. People did sketches of it, and wrote descriptions. So the ship leaves, and it goes down in the Mediterranean with the rhinoceros on board.

Now, there are various theories, but I believe a sketch made its way to Dürer, and he did his fanciful riff on it; first in a sepia drawing, which is absolutely beautiful, and then a woodcut that became a very popular image. He wrote that he had done it from life, but there's no way, because it's full of these horny protuberances and plates that real rhinoceroses don't have. Overall, it's a very good drawing, if you blur your eyes. It's definitely an Indian rhinoceros. But Kenneth Clark, or someone like that, wrote, Oh, he's covered in metal armor, and that's taken over people's ability to actually look at Dürer's rhino. If you really look at that rhinoceros he does not have armor. What he has are shell-like structures that are from crustaceans and insects and crabs, and things like that. There's nothing man-made about him. Dürer was capable of drawing a machine or a knight in armor. And this is not what he drew. When you look at it—you've seen a lobster before, and everything on this rhino looks like it comes off a lobster or a horseshoe crab.

I don't know if Dürer knew that this rhino drowned. But it's fantastic that this thing was reborn as a sea creature after it drowned in a most unnatural way. The rhino was chained to the deck of the ship so he couldn't get out of his situation. He could have probably swum to shore—he would have been the only survivor.

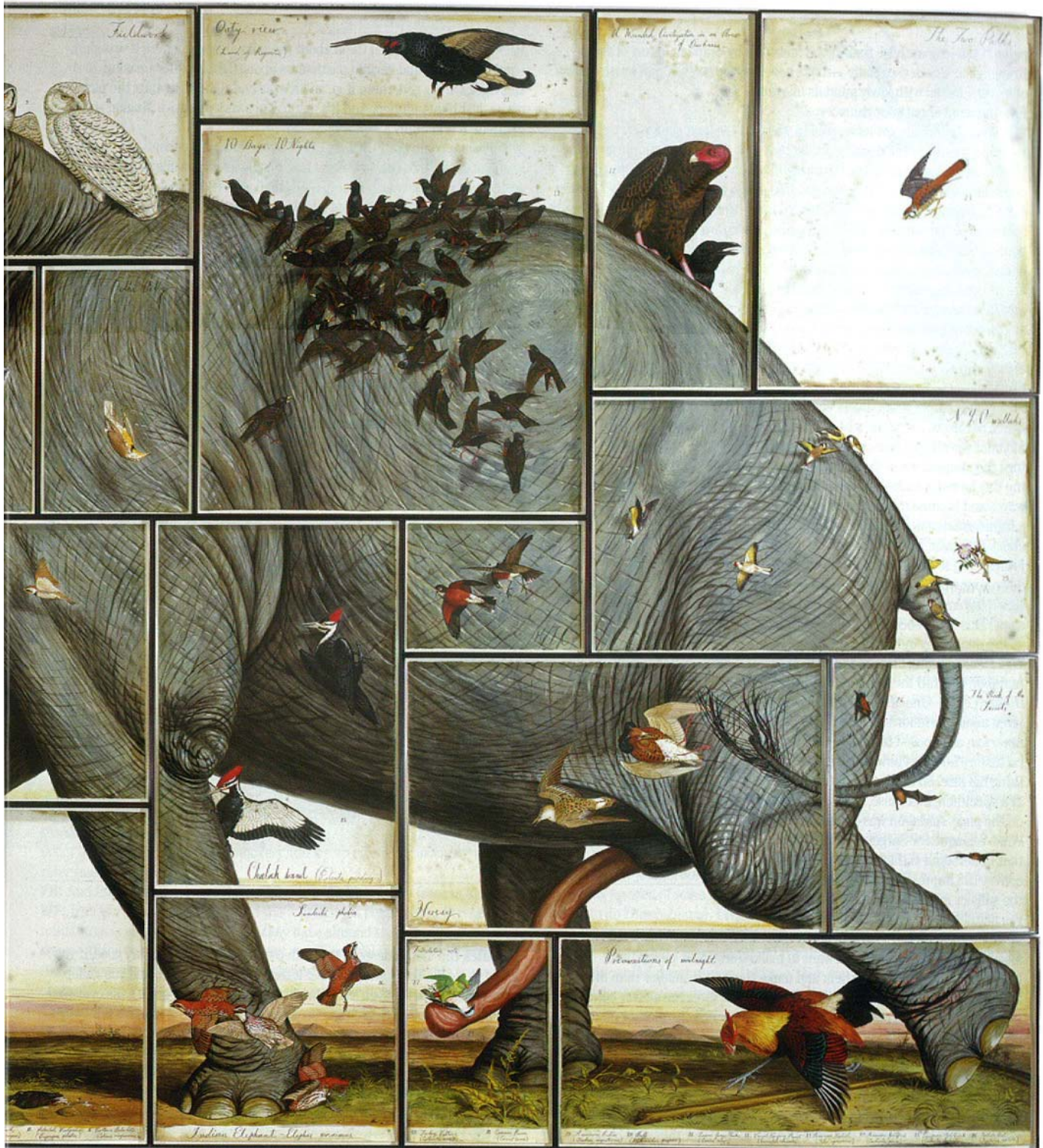
FH: So you don't think Dürer was trying to say something about how he drowned and wound up with all these crustaceans?

WF: Well no—this was the way he went about creating monsters. Leonardo made suggestions about how you create monsters and that's exactly what you do. You take things from the seashore, horns from goats and things like that, and you take reptiles, and you put them all together. When you look at the devil creature in *Knight, Death and the Devil*, you can see that Dürer must have had a small natural history collection that he gathered off of beaches, and horns from horned animals, and certain types of



Nila, 1999-2000, 144 by 216 inches.

up. Certain tasks have to be done all in one shot, and you can't make any mistakes."



"I didn't see any reason why I couldn't use an anachronistic language. It wasn't tapped out in any way for me."

pelts. If you look at those really good monsters by Cranach or any of them—Brueghel, or Bosch especially—that's how they did it. They had beetles, a lot of insects, mixed with lowly animals like goats, pigs.

FH: And what about your rhinoceros?

WF: What I suddenly got interested in was that the boat sank with a rhinoceros chained to the deck. What did *that* look like? It's as simple as that. Dürer's rhino ended up being *the* image of a rhino for 300 years. Even after other rhinoceroses arrived in Europe, this image just trumped them. And you can tell, because it will have these weird horns that only Dürer drew. It totally steamrolled the real rhinos that did make it to Europe. But it came so close to being a real rhino. If the rhino had arrived in Rome, Leonardo and all these people would have drawn it, and it would have been perfect. Because there are life drawings of the elephant that Pope Leo owned—elephants make it into Renaissance art without all of these crazy elaborations. Also elephants are easier to have around. A rhino's a very difficult thing.

FH: Yeah . . . how did they get it onto the ship?

WF: Strangely enough, it sounds very tractable, from the description.

FH: They got a nice one.

WF: Which I don't think is very easy to do. What I wanted was the rhino that Dürer never saw—that he wished he'd seen, really. But right at the dramatic moment when he's about to become art history, the moment when the actual animal, the way he really looked, sunk under the waves and became this crustacean. This was a transformational moment that brought me chills. I thought, I have to paint that.

FH: Getting to the idea that you've pared down your work, I'd like to address the tiger [*Hyrkania*, 2007] that's in the Kasmin show. This is the second version of a tiger you've done. Why did you revisit it?

WF: I was painting birds in the style of Audubon up until the first tiger, *Thanh Hoang* [1997]. One of the things I always loved about Audubon's *Birds of North America*, as opposed to certain other natural history books, is how he painted everything life-size. So that you're really looking at a specimen, in a sense, that's been posed on the page. Audubon was an autodidact. What Velázquez or Sargent or artists like that understand is that if you want to convey the impression of life-size, you set the subject inside the frame a little bit. If you actually paint it life-size it's pushing up against the picture plane in a way that looks unnatural. So unless you want to make things look heroic, and bigger than life, you recess them and make them a bit smaller than life; and then they look like they're in space. And that gives the viewer comfort, in a sense. When you push something right up against the picture plane, you get something else altogether. The thrill about Audubon is that he gives you dimensions of the actual bird—it's 3 inches from the tail to the tip. I always liked that, because I thought there was a tension in it.

I had seen a similar thing in India. When maharajas shot tigers, they had their court painters measure the tiger and do paintings of the tiger with certain markings and stripes that were unique to the tiger they shot. A portrait of the tiger, life-size, the same way Audubon did. I forget where I saw them—I think they were in Jaipur, in the palace there. The thing's 10 feet long! Because the tiger was 8 feet from tail to nose. And 4 or 5 feet high. And they

have little Hindi notes on them about the animal, about where it was shot, what date it was and certain particulars about the hunt. It's amazing, to see this tiger. Oh my god, there it is, and it's pushed right up against the picture plane, just like Audubon. And it's painted in a very primitive Mughal style.

FH: Which is actually a miniaturist style.

WF: It was a completely thrilling discovery: a particular portrait of a tiger that was shot in the 18th century. There it is, I could know how big he was and estimate how heavy he was. If I could read Hindi, it would probably say how heavy he was. I got thrilled by that and decided I had to do it. But in painting that first tiger—I think it's a successful piece, but I was still in a mode where I believed that you had to put everything that you knew into every picture. Young artists do this. Though I was a late bloomer—I wasn't even that young, I was in my 30s. But I wasn't a mature enough artist to let it alone. So I just crammed it full of every folk tale I read about tigers, and I put hidden figures in all the stripes. It's a Vietnamese tiger that tells the entire martial history of Vietnam. There are female warriors from the fifth century who fought against the Chinese in those stripes, French soldiers, generals, everything. I mean, it's just too much.

And the terrible thing is I really fudged it. I had this medieval bestiary, in which I read about fooling a tiger by throwing a glass ball at it. My feeling at the time was that this was a mean, Western trick, like the kind we used to try



Thanh Hoang, 1997, 60½ by 119½ inches.

and trick the Vietnamese. In the 13th-century bestiary, the story goes, if you're going to steal a tiger cub, you steal it from the mother tiger, and you gallop off on horseback, and you start throwing these reflective glass balls over your shoulder. When the female tiger sees her reflection she thinks it's her cub, and she curls up to nurse it. She realizes she's been fooled, flies into a rage and comes after you again. And this keeps happening until you get away.

But I really didn't read the myth carefully. If I had, I would have noticed it said, This is how you hunt the tigers in Hyrcania. And I looked up Hyrcania—I don't know if it's Greek or Latin—but it's essentially Iran! And the tiger was the Persian tiger—a subspecies that's extinct now. And I thought, Oh, I dropped this into some sort of picture about Vietnam when I never should have. I realized that I had to revisit that story.

FH: So you overloaded the first image, *Thanh Hoang*.



Hyrcania, 2007, 60 by 119½ inches.

WF: It's really fun to look at, but the only justification I had for putting the story in is that I put in every myth about how the tiger got his stripes—he was tied up to a tree, and the tree was set on fire, and the stripes were burned into his skin. I put Chinese myths in, and Western myths, without knowing about Hyrcania and how that would fit in. And now the world is the way it is now.

FH: Mmm . . . how convenient!

WF: And the most perfect conceptual lock for me was that this is exactly what people are afraid of in that part of the world! They're afraid we're going to steal their young! That hateful Western ways are going to infect their culture through the young, and that these illusionary children, they're not really recognizable, are going West—they're leaving you, and you're left with this . . . this phantom. The reflection. The thing that you wanted is no longer your kid—it's just you, reflected. Without that fear, you don't fly airplanes into buildings. You don't do that unless you feel that kind of rage.

So now it was going to be super-simple. It was going to be this extinct tiger, the Persian tiger. And I decided to focus on a completely different aspect of the story—the moment when the tiger realizes that it's been fooled. That this is not its cub, that this is just a mockery and a reflection. It looks up to see the rider making off with its child.

FH: And the landscape is very beautiful—it looks like cherry trees in bloom.

WF: Iran is a gorgeous country. And the way that it's portrayed in Persian miniatures is always in the spring—they have almond trees and pear trees—those parts of the world are very, very beautiful in the spring, before the landscape gets blasted. I did enough research to know that this is a very characteristic Persian mountain landscape, with the flowering trees and those fields. And what's interesting is that when you start looking at photos of Iran, you see the same kind of mountains and colors and palette that you see in the Persian miniatures.

FH: And the tiger's to scale.

WF: Exactly—in that weird Audubony kind of way. As if you're in the room with the animal. It's not recessed in space. I do a one-to-one thing. And I tend to paint the large version of the animal. It's fun to paint them as big as they get.

FH: You do your paintings on very large sheets of paper. How do you prepare the paper?

WF: I have 20-yard rolls of watercolor paper 60 inches high. I roll out 10 feet

of watercolor paper and rip it to size. I mop it with water, then I drip it with browns and ochers and umbers to make it foxed and aged. I just give it a little history—but I paint the history on. You don't use tea, as people think, to age paper. You use paint, because then you can control it.

When it's dry, I pin it to a big board and put it on two easels that I can crank up and down so I can work on different areas. I do many, many pencil drawings—erase and draw, erase and draw, until I have the animal the way I want it. I go to the Museum of Natural History if the animal is on display, or get a "backstage pass" there to do some studies. My studio is littered with studies I've done at the Museum of Natural History. Those are the particulars of the animal, and they're right out of the method of any natural history artist—you try to get the fur direction right and all that kind of nonsense.

And then the painting: Certain tasks have to be done rapidly and all in one shot, and you can't make any mistakes. Watercolor, like fresco, is something that moves forward, unlike oil, where you can back up. I read a Calvin Tomkins piece about John Currin where he's scraping a leg out and repainting it, scraping a leg out and repainting it, scraping a leg out and repainting it—but I have to get it right the first time. I can maybe adjust a detail here and there in a reverse way by just sort of removing some of the pigment with water and then repainting an area of some detail, but no big revisions can be made. When I started to do *Thanh Hoang*, I realized that's what I have to do—plan everything out ahead of time. Completely nail your drawing down before you start painting. That's what I mean about not repainting a leg a hundred times. If you really do a careful drawing ahead of time, then you know that the leg will be fine. You don't have to scrape it out and repaint it. It won't be wonky or weird.

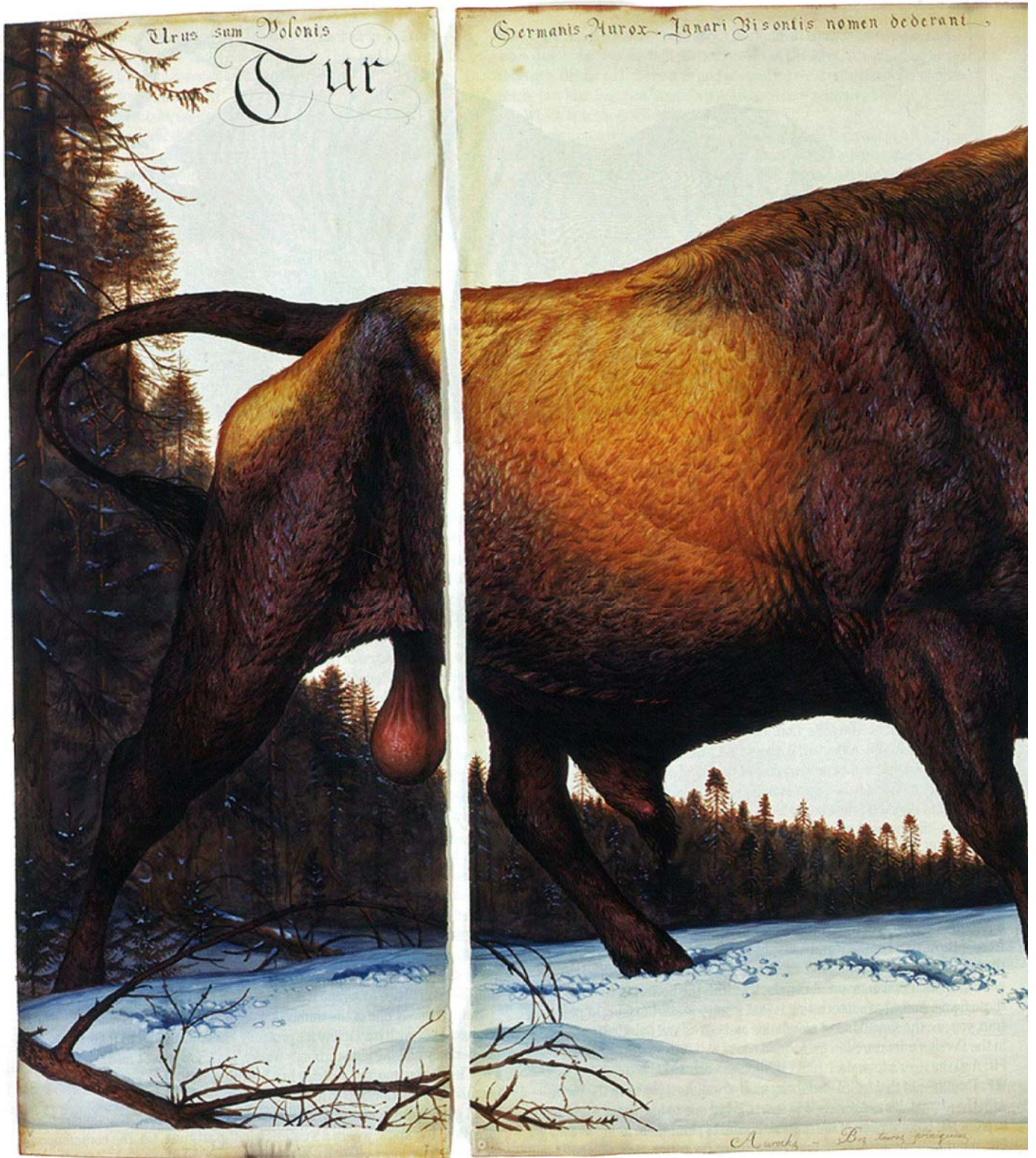
But, of course, one of the things that John is trying to do is make the thing strange. I bet with his facility it's probably easier just to paint it correctly. He's deliberately making it disturbingly wacky, you know what I mean.

FH: Clearly you, too, are working in a historical tradition. You must have a complicated relationship to it.

WF: I get very uncomfortable with some kinds of academic, reactionary figurative art. You know, where it's catering to the attitude, Oh, the contemporary art world, it's going to hell in a handbasket. And there are a lot of figurative painters where that's why they're doing it.

FH: Passing a judgment.

"You don't have to know that I'm painting the aurochs from a Nazi



Tur, 2007, 98 by 163½ inches. All photos this article courtesy Paul Kasmin Gallery, New York.

zookeeper geneticist point of view, but that's what I'm doing."



WF: On the "crap that's out there," this kind of thinking. I'm not comfortable with that at all. If I hear that Francis Alys pushed a block of ice around Mexico City until it disappeared, I think that's really neat. I want my work to be infused with a contemporary sensibility that allows me to come at the thing from an angle like that. You don't have to know that I was painting the aurochs from a Nazi zookeeper geneticist point of view, but that's what I'm doing.

FH: So the contemporaneity comes from your attitude?

WF: I would hope that I'm not in opposition to discourses or theories that are more contemporary. It's just that I didn't see any reason why I couldn't use an anachronistic language. It seemed like the right language—it wasn't tapped out in any way for me. I realized I had the facility to create these perfectly credible artifacts just as well as the natural history people I started out admiring, in a demanding tradition. That I could put those demands on myself and meet the criteria. That I could create these objects that almost nobody else could create.

FH: And of course you came along at a time when that was okay again.

WF: Now it's okay. When I was starting out there was a lot of suspicion about my work. I met artists who seemed surprised that I was intelligent. They thought they were going to meet a knucklehead who was just hopelessly uncool. It took a while to realize there was something going on in my work. It has something to do with the way you can celebrate underground cartoonists now, or above-ground cartoonists for that matter—comic-book artists like Jack Kirby. That was the stuff I loved—that's what I wanted to be. And the legitimacy of things like tattooing art—there is something about that geeky, comic-book collector thing to what I'm doing. *Juxtapoz* magazine put me on the cover before any mainstream magazine. And now there's a lot of looking back—faux-archaic kind of stuff, like the cover of *The Believer*, which is meant to look like some sort of circus poster. There's a resurgence of a 19th-century eye for certain types of imagery. Didn't Chuck Close do a bunch of daguerreotypes recently?

FH: Yes, there's a huge interest in photography done with archaic processes.

WF: Exactly. And that gave it legitimacy too.

FH: In the back matter of the Taschen book, you talk about how important literary influences have been on you that that's where you start. So there's a visual vocabulary, but also a literary one that's just as important.

WF: Well, the visual vocabulary is literary as well, because it refers to books—natural history books. Watercolors, field notes, special collections in museums and libraries—that's where you see the stuff that looks most like my work. You have to get the gloves on, and the person brings it to you. You get to flip through it, but it doesn't leave the library.

FH: Is there any experience where you've had access to something that just blew your mind?

WF: Yes. Totally. I was very lucky. I made friends with this guy who's an archivist at the Museum of Natural History. I was doing a painting about Carl Akeley, the one of the gorilla holding Carl Akeley's skull [*Sanctuary*, 1998]. It was my Museum of Natural History painting, and I was researching it in the Special Collections. I was coming in and asking if they had any photos of the dead gorillas. He takes out the glass-plate negatives, and then he says, Hey, I've got something for you. And he went away and came back with boxes filled with plaster death masks of the six gorillas that are in the diorama. The masks were done in the field, in 1927. And they still have gorilla fur stuck in the plaster. These are positives, so what they did is make a negative cast, and when they pulled it off the animal's face, some of the fur came away. And then when they put the plaster in the negative and pulled it out they yanked some of the fur back out again. And there are bloody stains on them.

The thing about a gorilla—you've got to imagine. You have to reconstruct his face when you get back to New York. You've skinned his face—so what the heck is left? It's just a piece of leather. You can't tell what he looked like. But they wanted to get it right. You can recognize the gorillas in the Museum of Natural History from the death masks—they are the exact gorillas, down

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to the wrinkles on their noses. The innovation that Akeley came up with in the Museum of Natural History is that you make a sculptural portrait of the animal that you shot, down to the veins and everything. Then you put the skin over it and work it into place with a slow-drying glue. Those aren't couches, they're beautiful sculptures, with all the muscles and tendons in place. That's why they look the way they do; they're incredible. Before Akeley, you made an armature, and you put the skin over it, then you just stuffed it until it was full. You've got no muscles, you've got no veins—you've got no portraiture. One of the ways you can tell they're death masks is that their eyes are open. You can't put plaster on a living animal's eyeball.

So I'm holding these objects that were literally in contact with this thing—and I'd seen a lot of photos of the dead gorillas as well. That blew me away—it was a whole family. A big male, some females, some young.

FH: When you did your Akeley painting, did you use a particular gorilla?

WF: It was Akeley's favorite gorilla—but he's stealing Akeley's skeleton. Akeley killed that gorilla. This is where the work is more complicated than people know. You just look at it and you think, it's a gorilla painting and he's holding a skull. You think it may have something to do with Hamlet or whatever—but it's a portrait of what Akeley called "The Old Man of Mikeno"—Mikeno was the mountain where he was shot. Akeley didn't know how old gorillas could get, but this was an elderly silverback and he thought it must be over 100 years old. They only live to be about 50. But he didn't know—they were new to gorillas. It was 1927, and they barely knew anything about them. They were afraid they were going to be charged and ripped to shreds. They had no idea what the gorillas would do. Akeley was one of the first to observe that they were peaceful animals when not provoked—and big vicious things when they were provoked. He got a pretty good read on their personality just by going up there and shooting them. But he fell in love with this animal—the character of its face.

And it's even more complicated than this. There's a picture of Akeley holding that death mask, just gazing at it. He did a bronze bust of that very gorilla that's in the Primate Hall at the Museum of Natural History. But when he brought a second expedition to the same mountains, he died of dysentery and was buried at the spot that's depicted in the diorama. The artists painted the grave of Akeley, in a sense, as a tribute to him. Years later his grave was robbed and the skeleton was stolen—probably in one of the wars that are frequent in that region. The slaughter in Rwanda—some of it happened right at the foot of these volcanoes. Many of the gorillas were killed during those conflicts as well, for food, when things got desperate. People just machine-gunned them.

FH: You've stopped writing so much in your paintings.

WF: I think that, too, was a certain insecurity on my part, and a certain kind of pedantry in my personality. The least successful work is over-explained. These stories are really deep and they're really rich, but it's sometimes better if they're not written all over the piece. I just allow myself to have faith in the image. What I was trying to convey with notes were my efforts at research.

FH: Well it does add to the visual impact—using that archaic script.

WF: There are these Audubon watercolors where he's writing—sometimes

really peevisly, to his printer or even to himself—that the legs are actually pink, and white around the eye, please put in a scene that shows a rocky cliff and the seashore. He's in such a hurry that he just gives you the bird specimen. Or a note to James Mason, a young assistant of his, who was doing vegetation in the backgrounds, and it would say, Paint a magnolia branch better than you did the last time. You get indications of his fury to finish this project—his impatience and his stress. These notes are pretty amazing. And I loved that, when I saw the watercolors in the New-York Historical Society with such revealing personal bits. I decided to use that in my own watercolors.

FH: Do your kids enjoy what you do?

WF: Absolutely. My daughter Camelia, who's 10, says, I really like them, they're really big—and they're like storybooks.

FH: At your recent Brooklyn Museum show, you could watch the families. The kids would be really excited and worked up. But you'd also see the parents kind of looking at some of your images, thinking, for instance, Wait, there's a bird sitting on that elephant's erect penis. What do I do about *that*?



Sanctuary, 1998, 60 1/2 by 119 1/4 inches.

WF: I had one kid ask, Why do you paint so many boy animals? And I said, Well I actually paint a lot of girl animals too but you can't tell, like with a bird, unless you know the plumage.

FH: Some of them are so disturbing. When you start to look closely at the passenger pigeons [*Falling Bough*, 2002], for example.

WF: And there's a bull fucking a jaguar—something really crazy [*Chingado*, 1998]. The ones where I'm in the head of a delirious Audubon, or a delirious Akeley, those are the most disturbing. Those are the ones where our cultural assumptions about animals start to give way. They start to be frightening Freudian visions.

FH: It's not a sentimentalizing view of an animal.

WF: Yeah—I don't care so much about the animal. I care about the way we think about animals. □

Walton Ford's most recent show was on view at Paul Kasmin Gallery, New York, May 8-July 3, 2008. His midcareer retrospective, "Tigers of Wrath," was organized by the Brooklyn Museum, where it was on view Nov. 3, 2006-Jan. 28, 2007. It traveled in 2007 to the Norton Museum of Art, West Palm Beach, and the San Antonio Museum of Art. A large-format book surveying Ford's watercolors, Pancha Tantra (2007), was released by Taschen in spring 2008.