

Beauty & the Beasts

In the mesmerizing paintings of WALTON FORD, animals play both hero and villain of fairy tales for the 21st century. *By Carol Kino*

ENTERING THE WORLD of Walton Ford is like stepping into the pages of a delightfully disorienting picture book. At first glance, his meticulously made paintings of animals in watercolor and gouache suggest the work of an 18th-century naturalist, or maybe a 19th-century explorer. But look closely and mysterious details reveal themselves. A snake balances a caged songbird on its head. A tigress crouches in the grass, clutching a shiny globe. A monkey reclines on a sofa like Madame Récamier as a volcano erupts in the distance. The images, and the elusive historical tales behind them, seem both wondrous and subversive. As Ford says, his gloriously anachronistic style allows him "to time travel and plant seeds of confusion in the past."

The artist's studio, in the Berkshire Hills of Massachusetts, is littered with piles of paint-splattered volumes, including a 19th-century bird-watching manual, an 11th-century Latin bestiary and a 1994 Lonely Planet travel guide to India. "I don't get any of my ideas from nature," Ford says. "I get them all from the great indoors—from books, from the Internet, from scholars. I throw myself into research." *The Medici Giraffe*, Marina Belozerskaya's 2006 book of stories about exotic animals throughout history, inspired his painting *Malmaison* (2007). A ten-foot-long portrayal of two flightless birds, a cassowary and an emu, locked in battle beside a pink rosebush, the work

seems to channel the exacting observation of John James Audubon, the mystery of Pieter Brueghel the Elder and the technical virtuosity of Albrecht Dürer.

Ford found the seed idea for the painting in Belozerskaya's chapter on Joséphine Bonaparte, who, as Napoléon's ex-wife, spent her later years building an Enlightenment paradise of plants and animals (including flightless birds) at Malmaison, her château near Paris. "What Joséphine didn't reckon with is that they're vicious animals," Ford says. Although he found no evidence that her birds ever fought, he felt the fictional struggle made an apt metaphor for Napoléon's predatory empire building and the couple's bitter divorce. As often happens in Ford's world, creatures embody a human drama.

"I'm not the least bit interested in what animals do in nature," he says. "It's their cultural history I'm interested in." He acknowledges that the history is often troubling—and that man, not beast, usually runs the show.

Over the past fifteen years the artist's blend of luminous 19th-century style and dark 21st-century mythmaking has transformed the forty-eight-year-old into one of the most admired talents of his generation. In 2006 crowds flocked to his midcareer retrospective at the Brooklyn Museum, where they marveled at spectacular works like *Nila* (2000), an eighteen-foot-long, life-

Opposite: Ripe mangoes and pomegranates keep an Indian monkey reaching for more in HIS CHAPLAIN (2003). Watercolor, gouache, ink and pencil on paper; 59% by 40 1/8 inches.

sized watercolor of an elephant. In 2008 the Smithsonian American Art Museum acquired *Tur* (2007), his first of what's likely to be several renderings of the fearsome aurochs, the prehistoric ox from which all modern cattle are descended. "It fits quite well with our 19th- and 20th-century narrative tradition," says Joanna Marsh, the institution's James Dicke Curator of Contemporary Art. "The blending of allegory and craftsmanship with

sociopolitical commentary—all of that makes Ford's paintings unique and fascinating on a variety of levels."

Ford taught himself to paint before entering grade school in Westchester County, New York. Only a few years later, his technically brilliant depictions of birds and other animals bore an uncanny resemblance to the work of Audubon. But six or seven years out of art school, living in New York City, he found himself strug-

gling to fit into an art world that no longer seemed to value traditional subject matter or labor-intensive painting. One day, for fun, he made an upside-down rendition of the master's famous *American Flamingo* (1838). It struck him that the bird "seemed to be tumbling through space" as if shot by a hunter, suggesting darker, more conceptual themes. "I did it for my own amusement," he says, "and then it developed into something more complex."

He soon decided to take on life-sized depictions of animals, as in his latest show, which was held last spring at the Paul Kasmin Gallery, in New York City. Kasmin has represented Ford since the early 1990s. "Almost immediately I had friends and clients who wanted to buy paintings, and it hasn't changed very much," the dealer says. (But the prices have: they currently range from \$10,000 for one of his eleven etchings to \$800,000

for a grandly scaled watercolor.) Kasmin's main contribution has been "encouraging Walton to fulfill his ambitions and to make everything to the highest level that he can achieve, whether it is in size or ideas," he notes, adding, "I don't think it really matters if he spends six months or a year making one work."

Indeed, Ford's method is a painstaking one that can take up

to a year per painting. After figuring out his ideas, he starts to "plan the attack" with hundreds of preparatory drawings and gouaches and many visits to New York's Museum of Natural History to make sketches of taxidermied animals. Only then does he move on to watercolor, using the same dry-brush technique favored by Dürer. "The actual painting is an execution of

the idea that has already been worked out," Ford says. "It's like building a piece of furniture or an instrument."

He considers himself lucky to be continuing the oldest human tradition in art making. "The first things human beings painted were life-sized animals," he says, mentioning the caves at Lascaux, in France. "That's what I paint. It taps into some-

thing that's deeper in us than just what's going on this season."

In April, a decade's worth of the artist's work will be published in the book Walton Ford: Pancha Tantra (Taschen: \$70)—an update of a 2008 limited edition from the same publisher—with an introduction by Bill Buford. For information on Ford's paintings and prints, visit paulkasmingallery.com. ❖