

Nina Katchadourian



## The Nest: not just for birds

By Janis Gibson  
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pocketlike structure, often twigs, grasses and mud, prepared by a bird for incubating eggs and rearing young; a snug retreat or refuge, resting place, home; an assemblage of things lying or set close together...

All of these definitions and more apply to The Nest, an exhibition of art in nature, at the Katonah (N.Y.) Museum of Art through June 19.

Filling the museum's atrium and two large exhibition rooms, the colorful, informative and fun presentation features human made art works of virtually every form and medium; pre-Columbian Peruvian feather textiles — loincloths, a headdress and an extraordinary tunic dated 200–600 CE; varied birds' nests from the collection of Yale's Peabody Museum of Natural History; and two live video feeds from nests around the country.

The show features the work of 18 artists: Sharon Beals, Sanford Biggers, Dove Bradshaw, Björn Braun, John Burtle, Walton Ford, Shiela Hale, Fiona Hall, Porky Hefer, Nina Katchadourian, Louise Lawler, Judy Pfaff, James Prosek, Hunt Slonem, Kiki Smith, Andreas Sterzing, Paul Villinski and David Wojnarowicz.

When the exhibit was being developed, its curator, Elizabeth Rooklidge, expressed a desire to include some real nests, to which artist, writer, and naturalist James Prosek of Easton responded, "I know where we can get some — the Peabody Museum at Yale has a great collection." Prosek is a volunteer at the museum, and last Thursday he and Kristof Zyskowski, collections manager of the Division of Vertebrate Zoology at the Peabody, and co-curators of the nest selection, hand delivered and installed a dozen nests, representing a wide range of size and materials. While the two crested oropendola hanging nests at 42 and 52 inches are most impressive, it is the common yellowthroat nest in an old shoe that many guests find most charming.

For The Nest, Prosek painted bird silhouette murals on the museum's atrium entry walls and on one wall of an exhibition room, to which he has added a mixed-media fireplace made of brick and molding. The silhouette of a large oak tree is behind the fireplace and a bronze log is within, with handmade clay flowers emerging from it, representing the resiliency of nature. He also created three small sculptures in ebony that rest on the mantel. A nearby pedestal displays another Prosek sculpture that looks like a bowl-shaped burned-out log with a lemon resting inside, but both are made of bronze.

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The bird silhouettes are numbered in a style familiar to anyone who has seen a Peterson's Field Guide, but Prosek provides no key, noting, "You can experience nature, enjoy it, without knowing what something is called."

James Prosek grew up in Easton and today lives a couple of houses away from his childhood home. He was introduced to fishing at the age of 9, and "liked it, especially fishing in the reservoirs, which is illegal, but added to its appeal." Entrepreneurially oriented, he "tied flies and cut lawns as a kid." He always loved drawing and painting, but when he entered college at Yale, he heeded his father's advice to "study something practical," and began the architecture program.

In his junior year, however, he published his first book, *Trout of North America*, writing the text and creating the illustrations. "It did well enough that I thought maybe I could make a living that way after all, so I switched my major to English literature, but my background in architecture and design principles has served me well."

He followed his first book with *Trout of the World*, first published in 2003 and updated in 2013, as well as other books on the natural world.

Much of Prosek's recent and current work has been around the ideas of lines and naming. "There are no lines in nature," he notes, "but humans have a need for boundaries, and naming — or renaming — things. I've always thought about this, but have been reflecting on it more because of a project I am doing with the Buffalo Bill Center of the West in Wyoming on the Greater Yellowstone Migration that will open this summer. If a buffalo is inside the 'line' of the national park, it's a tourist attraction, but if it crosses the arbitrary line it has no idea exists, it can have real world consequences — it can be shot."

He continued, "Nature is fluid, interconnected, but to talk about it, we need to name it. This gives a false impression of the world as lists, which is against its holistic nature. 'The Nest' is a mix of art objects with natural history objects — I think it is valuable to break those boundaries."

Prosek will present a half-hour gallery talk at the museum this Sunday, March 13, beginning at 3:30.

For the run of the show the Learning Center is conducting nest-related projects, including creating nests and building birdhouses; an added highlight in the room is an exhibition of sketchbooks and drawings created by Prosek as a child, showing the budding artist's early development.

Another special event is a free admission Family Day, Sunday, April 17, noon to 5, a fun-filled, bird-themed day including a nest sculpture workshop, a nest building project in the garden and bird-related activities throughout museum campus.

Katonah Museum of Art is at 134 Jay Street-Route 22 in Katonah, NY. For more information, visit [katonahmuseum.org](http://katonahmuseum.org) or call 914-232-9555.