



Artists Speak: Walton Ford

Born
1960, Larchmont, NY

Education
MFA, Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, RI

Lives and Works
Great Barrington, MA

Media & Materials
Etching, watercolor, gouache, and acrylic painting

Biography
Originally intending to become a filmmaker, Walton Ford later adapted his talents as a storyteller to his unique style of large-scale watercolor. Blending depictions of natural history with political commentary, Ford's detailed paintings satirize the history of colonialism and the continuing impact of slavery and other forms of political oppression on today's social and environmental landscape. Inspired by a family history that includes southern slave owners, Ford is interested in confronting these histories through the images he creates. An enthusiast of the watercolors of John James Audubon, Ford celebrates the myth surrounding the renowned naturalist-painter while at the same time repositioning him as an infamous anti-hero who, in reality, killed more animals than he ever painted.

"I am doing the kind of research that legitimate natural history artists do, but I do it in a very lazy way compared to them. I don't want to ever pretend that I'm like one of those guys.... There is another level to this sort of natural history-art thing that actually doesn't interest me, but I do a kind of imitation of it.

"Part of the reason I got interested in using watercolor is that I was interested in painting things that looked like Audubons. They were like fake Audubons, but I twisted the subject matter a bit and got inside his head and tried to paint as if it was really his tortured soul portrayed...as if his hand betrayed him and he painted what he didn't want to expose about himself. And it was very important to me to make them look like Audubons, to make them look like they were a hundred years old...like he painted them, but that they escaped out of him.



A Sensorium, 2003. Watercolor, gouache, ink, and pencil on paper, 60 x 119 inches. Courtesy the Artist and Paul Kasmin Gallery. Below: *A Sensorium*, detail, 2003.



Nila, 1999-2000. Watercolor, gouache, ink and pencil on paper, 144 x 216 inches. Installation view at Paul Kasmin Gallery, New York, 2002. Private collection, New York.

"The early natural history artists used to carry little sketchbooks with them.... I've taken the exact techniques and the exact kind of paper and calligraphy that they used and made this enormous version that makes no sense. There would be no reason for a natural history study that was ten feet by five feet. But that is one of the things I was interested in doing. Taking small bits of history and magnifying them.... The first animal I painted like this was a tiger. And after I finished sketching, it was a life-sized tiger on the sheet of paper. It was actually frightening to be in the room with it.... It really could eat you."

"The big, big thing I'm always looking for in my work is a sort of attraction-repulsion thing, where the stuff is beautiful to begin with until you notice that some sort of horrible violence is about to happen or is in the middle of happening. Or that it's some sort of interior monologue.

Activity Suggestions:

According to the symbolist system in Ford's work *Nila*, starlings bearing down on the elephant represent the Western tourist; the goldfinches who are working to plant flowers are Peace Corps volunteers; and the woodpecker is the Westerner who goes to India to shop. Create your own symbolist system. For whom will you create it, and what will your symbols be?

Create an archive of images that depict the natural landscape and our relationship to the natural world. Categorize and organize it according to the major themes that surface in the images you collect.



Art:21 Production Stills © Art21, Inc. 2006

Art21, Inc. is a non-profit contemporary art organization serving students, teachers, and the general public. Art21 produces the Emmy-nominated, nationally broadcast PBS series *Art:21—Art in the Twenty-First Century*, a wide range of education materials, and outreach programs. This multi-faceted project introduces audiences to a diverse range of contemporary visual artists working in the United States today and to the art they are producing now.

For more ways to use Art21 in your classroom, check out:



Season One, Two and Three on VHS and DVD: to order call (800) 533-2847

Free Art21 Educators' Guides: www.pbs.org/art21/education/teachingmaterials



Find lesson plans and ideas for the classroom on the Art21 Web site and Online Lesson Library:



www.pbs.org/art21/education



Art21 slide sets from Davis Art Images: Call (800) 533-2847 ext. 253 to place your order.