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Humanimalia

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RISD XYZ

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H U M A N I M A L I A

Windsor, May 1829
(2014, watercolor,
gouache and ink on
paper, 59¾ x 40¾")
portrays a mandrill
named Happy Jerry
who is said to have
drunk port, smoked
a pipe and dined
with King George IV
in London during the
early 19th century.

by Liisa Silander

"I FEEL THE NEED TO BE WATCHFUL," writes Windsor (the smoking mandrill) in a suitably iconic script. People are presumably weird, unpredictable, "perhaps dangerous," he soberly observes.

This isn't the first time **Walton Ford 82 FAV** has gone inside the head of another primate to try to figure out what's going on at the point where humans and fellow animals meet. That finely calibrated gradation between the so-called wild kingdom and supposedly more civilized society provides an ongoing undercurrent in his work, steeped as it is in questioning genteel notions of "natural history."

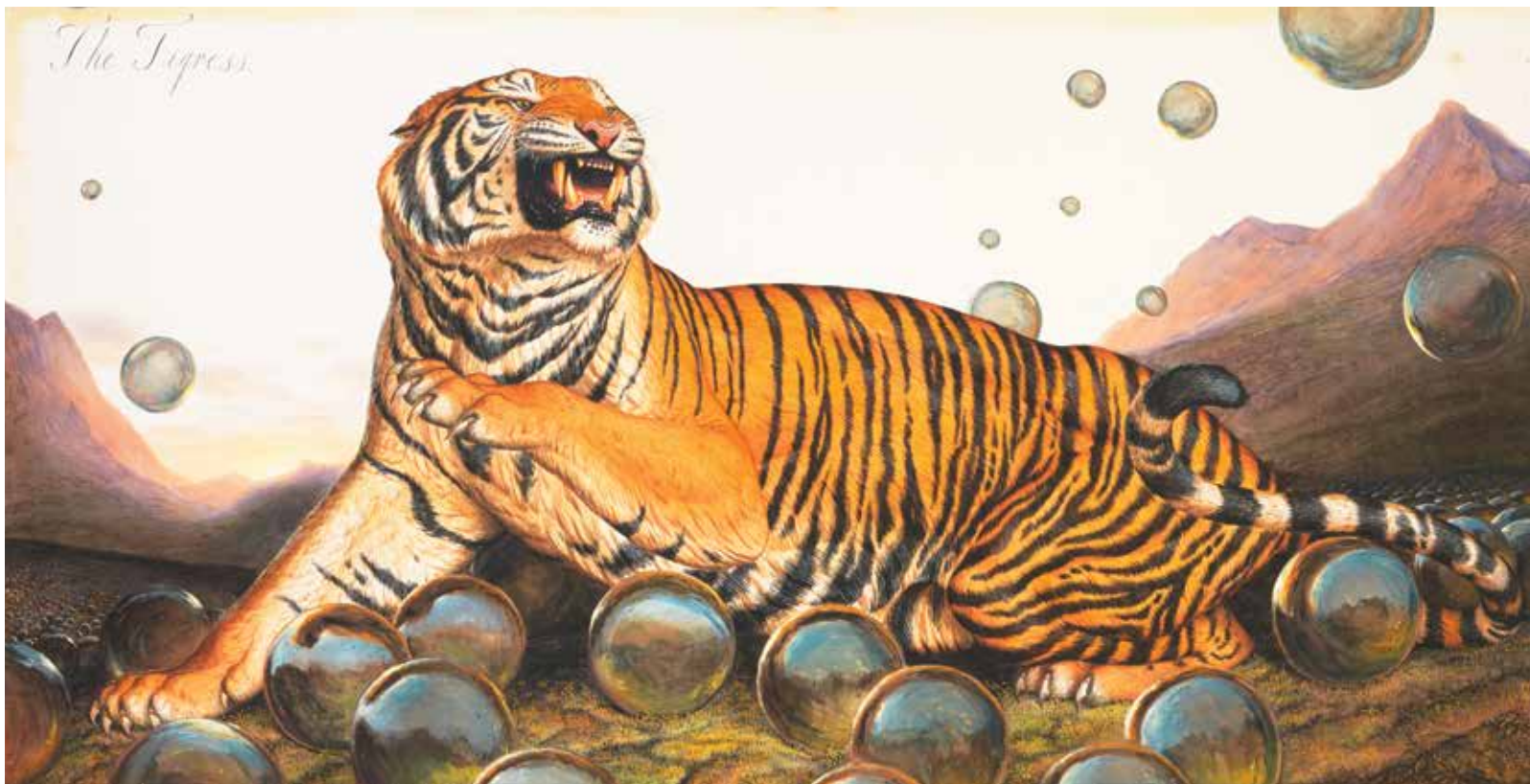


Windsor, May, 1829

My dear friend, I have just received your letter of the 14th inst. and am glad to hear that you are well. I have just received your letter of the 14th inst. and am glad to hear that you are well. I have just received your letter of the 14th inst. and am glad to hear that you are well.

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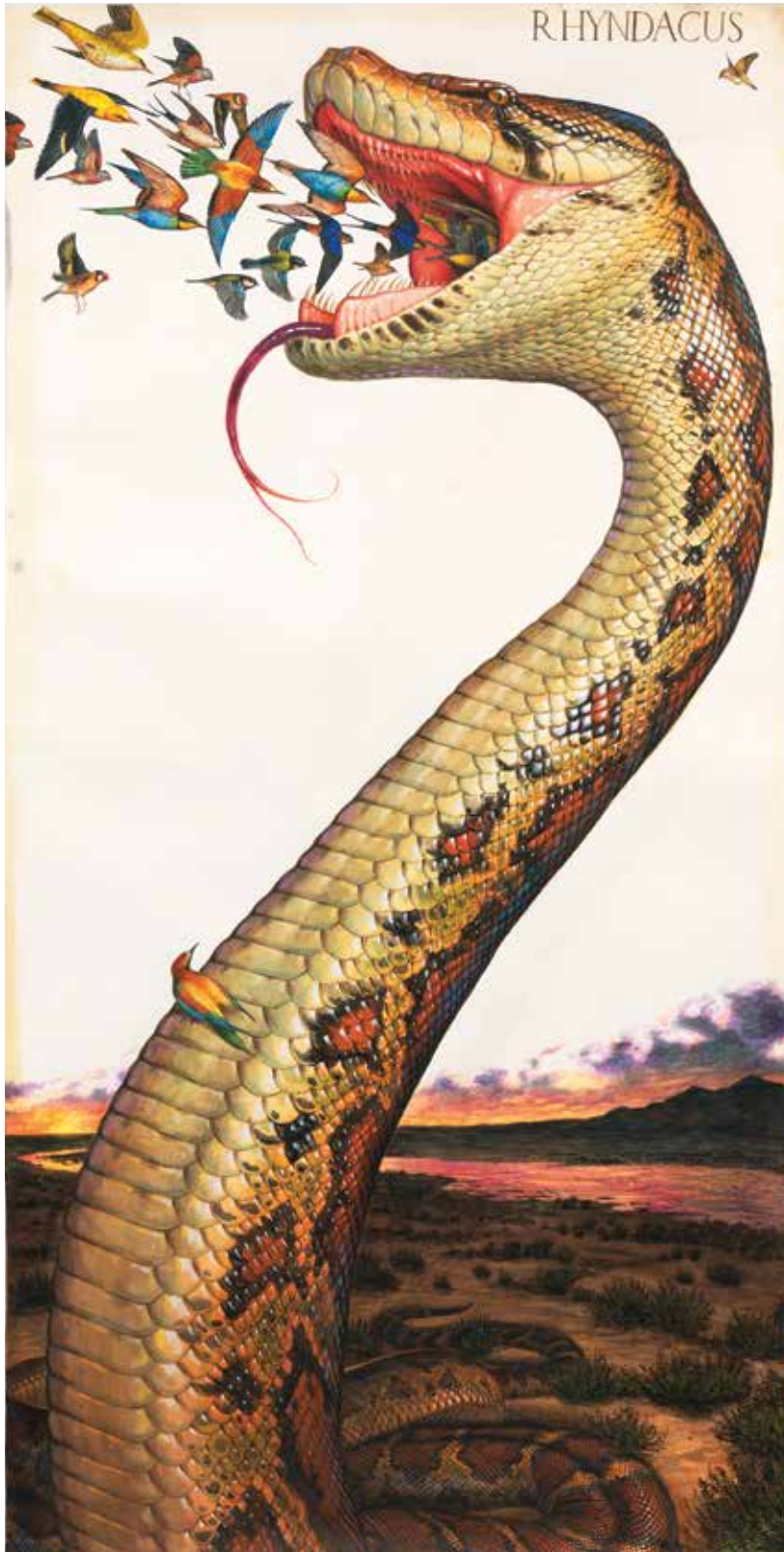
In *Watercolors*, Ford's current solo show at Paul Kasmin Gallery in New York, he continues to explore the visual and narrative scope of traditional natural history painting through monumental, obsessively detailed paintings measuring five to 10 feet tall. As in the past, several of the new pieces in the show incorporate ornate handwritten marginalia with the feel of the field notes kept by legendary 19th-century naturalists like John Audubon and Charles Darwin. But for the first time the musings are from the perspective of the animals themselves.

"As a realist painter of birds, quadrupeds, reptiles and other species, Ford has any number of peers in the field of natural history illustration but very few in the world of contemporary art," notes Calvin Tompkins in a 2009 piece in *The New Yorker*. "His technical facility is dazzling," he adds. "Working almost exclusively in watercolor, he can render feathers, fur, hide, trees, plants, weather, landscape and other natural elements with virtuosic skill. No one else, to my knowledge, has ever done watercolors of this size and ambition...and no contemporary artist has employed natural history to tell the kind of stories [he] tells."



Among Ford's most impressive recent works, *The Tigress* (2013, watercolor and gouache on paper, 60 x 120")—rumored to be owned by Leonardo DiCaprio—references a medieval story about a tigress who is robbed of her cub when a poacher drops glass orbs around her as a distraction.

left: His new painting *Bosse-de-Nage 1898—HA HA!* (2014, watercolor, gouache and ink on paper, 59 3/4 x 41 1/2") represents a return to classic form—showing animals as poorly behaved as humans.



“No one else, to my knowledge, has ever done watercolors of this size and ambition...and no contemporary artist has employed natural history to tell the kind of stories [he] tells.”

Calvin Tompkins, *The New Yorker*

In picturing these stories, Ford says he does “a huge amount of research on animals,” mining literary sources, folklore and historical anecdotes for inspiration and imagery. But it’s the drama of human-animal interactions that interests him most. Unlike Audubon, who focused on making paintings to document birds and other animals as they live in nature, Ford adds an implied human presence – often casting a dark, queasy shadow over the scene. Ultimately, his impressive rendering of minute details has less to do with the reality of how animals actually live than suggesting “the way animals live in the human imagination,” as he puts it. It’s anthropomorphism gone wild.

As a kid growing up in the exurbs of New York City, Ford loved drawing the snakes, turtles and other finds most boys like to pick up outdoors. By the time he was a teenager, he was creating illustrations for the local newspaper. At RISD being “a natural history geek” was hopelessly uncool, Ford admits, which is one reason he chose to major in Film/Animation/Video instead of Painting or Illustration. But that didn’t prevent him from continuing to pursue his naturalistic tendencies post-graduation.

Now, Ford’s work sells for six figures, with collectors happy that with this show he has returned to “his artistic self” after a slight detour, as *Vogue* noted in its recent review. Most aren’t as drawn to natural history per se as they are to what his work says about the species that has risen to the top of the animal kingdom. While the worlds Ford creates are clearly fabricated, they feel real and recognizable at the same time. Maybe it’s that, as animals, we find them oddly easy to relate to—whether or not we like what we see in the mirror. ■

Watercolors continues through June 21 at Paul Kasmin Gallery, 293 Tenth Avenue in Manhattan.

In *Rhyndacus* (2014, watercolor, gouache and ink on paper, 119¼ x 60¼") Ford portrays a magical, 60-foot serpent described in *De Natura Animalium*, an ancient Roman compendium of the natural world. The native Turkish flora and fauna in the details points to a monstrously majestic vision of the East.