

Cover Art Commentary: Gregg Hertzlieb on Robert Lostutter

Gregg Hertzlieb
January 4, 2018



Superb Sunbird, 1991

The Brauer Museum is grateful to receive from the collection of Josephine Ferguson a color lithograph titled *Superb Sunbird* by the contemporary Chicago artist Robert Lostutter. Lostutter is typically classified as an artist belonging to the stylistic category known as Imagism, a loosely affiliated movement centered around the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in the 1960s and 1970s. His high degree of technical skill and precision represents well the Imagist manner of working, although Lostutter differs somewhat from the other artists of this group by focusing more on poetic juxtaposition than on dark comedy, cartoon conventions, and wordplay. His images are unforgettable in their level of detail and invention, and the Brauer is grateful to represent his work with three examples in its collection.

Lostutter began his career working with large figurative compositions rendered in oil on canvas. He would precede these paintings with careful watercolor studies that in their immediacy and accompanying descriptive marginal notes would rival the large paintings in terms of artistic interest. Works depicting stylized male and female figures gave way eventually to representations of acrobats, some hooded and/or missing limbs, their skin

seemingly sewed like upholstery and exotically tattooed. These images, surreal and erotically charged, established Lostutter as a figure every bit as noteworthy as the first generation of Chicago Imagists, his art more hallucinatory than whimsical. Here too, the meticulously wrought oil paintings followed small watercolor studies that are prized by collectors as much as the much larger pieces.

Lostutter followed the acrobat works with creations displaying similar levels of technical sophistication and exactitude. However, rather than direct his efforts toward glaze after glaze of pigment on canvas he changed his primary medium to watercolor itself, not substantially increasing the size of paper from that he used for his earlier studies. In these pictures, his technical virtuosity sparkled to a startling degree, with his brushstrokes nearly microscopic in size to depict humans, males to be precise, wearing bird masks and displaying exotic plumage. Viewers of these small paintings could see levels of surface richness brought about by hours of painstaking applications of pigment seemingly by brushes of very few hairs. Remarkably, the artist was able to create works as labor intensive as his early canvases but on a much smaller scale, making them seem simultaneously like icons and fetishes.

Lostutter continues to concentrate on representations of male heads and busts adorned with feathers and beaks, although current works show the feathers segueing into skin colorations and exaggerated facial details. Sizes for his pictures show an increased range, and he has been continuing explorations of graphite as well as his signature watercolor. In addition to efforts in other sizes and unique media, he has done a number of original prints ranging from color lithographs to etchings, some hand colored using the same miniaturist approach that characterizes his watercolors in general.

The Brauer's *Superb Sunbird* is about medium size for the artist and in a multiple, an editioned piece, presents the fine touch so key to his art. Lithography is done through the artist's use of a greasy material, a type of crayon or ink for example, on a pristine stone or plate surface. Through his delicate shading and crisp linework, the artist was able to duplicate the paradoxical nature of feathers as unified, solid entities but built of minute, silky but solid component elements. Each of the artist's lines served to build the feather, and the wispieness of his strokes suggests the breezy airiness of the spread feathers. Evenly applied colors given richness and depth by careful shading moves the image from transcription into representation as act of devotion. Lostutter has prayed this exotic being into life through painstaking imaginative realization.

Lostutter's bird men exist in jungles of vivid light, not so much searching or pondering their colorful natures as striking poses, daring to show their beauty as they engage in ritual dance. The bird men are specimens, specific in their species, but move past the recording of their existences into the realm of the dance where the vitality of their expression is as important as their peculiar or distinct identities. Accept these creatures as bearers of beauty, the artist seems to say, as they diffidently betray their exoticism and glow in viewers' minds like rich jewels. Still within the pictures, they are caught in mid-motion using their bodies to move through fields that define them by giving purpose to their ritual of presenting. The artist's male birds use their lovely assets to seduce, to entice, to lure observers into deep appreciation of dreams. In their obliviousness to such

inspection and yet faintly coy acknowledgement of it, they recognize their allure but exist forever beyond grasp, beyond full understanding.

The Superb Sunbird is a being that fills the heart with hope and joy through its cheery color and enigmatic yet non-threatening nature. He offers himself for us to see so that in the world we inhabit, we can look for similar living things that inspire through their rare beauty and humbly give of themselves that our hearts are filled and our imaginations on the wing.