

# Chicago Tribune

## Watercolor Man

### Bird's eye view of iconic Chicago artist in 25-year retrospective

By Alan Artner

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Robert Lostutter lives scarcely a block away from the train station he passed through when he came to study at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago almost 40 years ago. So he was already close to a key place in his past at a time when a retrospective exhibition surveying a quarter-century of work -- at the Chicago Cultural Center -- prompted him to go back further.

He showed me a snapshot of a landscape barren except for an elderly man, a young boy and a crude playlot apparatus. The people were on their way home from a picnic at a cabin the family owned in the Flint Hills of Kansas. They had stopped at a one-room schoolhouse and were being photographed with the merry-go-round outside.

"This is my grandfather," Lostutter said, "and that's me. My grandfather pointed off into the distance. The sun was starting to set. The light was a wonderful amber-ocher color. He said, 'Look down at that line of trees.' There was a little green in the late-day sunlight and a little riverbank the trees were growing on. He said, 'Look real close.'

"I looked down, and there was this beautiful great blue heron against the green, against the amber light and the orange sky. And that color combination has stuck with me. If you look at some of the skies I've done, it directly comes from when I was that old -- about 6. My grandfather always pointed out birds to me. He loved them. And my great-grandfather stuffed birds; we had an attic with one whole wall of them. So this bird thing is maybe in the genes."

As the "Robert Lostutter: sHOW" indicates, the "bird thing" -- plumage from actual birds sprouting from human faces -- has been at the center of Lostutter's art for more than 20 years. Few artists in Chicago have explored a single theme as persistently. And no Chicago artist has worked as meticulously to realize a vision that unsettles even as it seduces.

Both characteristics were there from the start, in large oils influenced by the massive women of Richard Lindner and Lostutter's teacher at SAIC, John Rogers Cox. The debt to Lindner everybody recognized, but not the one to Cox, whose erotic paintings of women showed as much discipline about technique and preparation as his more famous landscapes. Lostutter describes Lindner as "a minor god in my life" at the start of the 1970s, but in his second solo exhibition, at the Deson-Zaks Gallery in 1973, the influence had begun to wane.



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That show was one of the more startling of the period, presenting large images of suspended male figures bound together in glistening second skins. The psychic menace, even more than the physical, made the oils unforgettable. Yet the show also had four watercolors of heads of bird-men, and they were the beginning of the work he continues today.

"Bob was an exacting craftsman," said former art dealer Marianne Deson, "and not only was his imagery unique but it also was extremely challenging. Some of his watercolors took my breath away. The ones I loved were really tiny, almost the size of postage stamps, but all his exquisite detail was there. He has been constant in both his imagery and craftsmanship, which developed within the framework of his own ethos."

Lostutter had worked concurrently in oils and watercolor. He says he doesn't know what caused him to settle on the latter exclusively. Up until then he had used watercolor traditionally, applying it in washes. But suddenly he started to play with it, building up passages with layers of minute cross-hatches. That he might create his own technique in watercolor intrigued him, especially because it would allow more control over a medium that when applied in washes had its own control, forcing an artist in part to go its way.

#### An evolution

The technique Lostutter developed is his own. Nobody teaches it. He's not even sure he could. It has progressed over decades, changing at just the point when Lostutter feels he has mastered one aspect or another. The changes, he emphasizes, have not been conscious. He feels they come about automatically, replacing ways of working that vanish. Initially, he says, that scared him because the earlier ways felt lost, never to be recovered. Then he understood he had to let them go, yielding to natural evolution.

Did something similar happen with subject matter? Was that how the bird-men came to dominate?

"I think in my mind I had something I had heard and it just popped back to the surface: Go after the things you really love. It's like telling a writer, write about what you know. One day, as I was struggling to find who I was as an artist, things came together. Go after what you really love. Well, I love birds, and I love drawing the human figure. That was my favorite thing in school, figure-drawing class, and I still have the desire to sneak off someplace and join a little class and draw the figure, for no reason other than it's just such a wonderful experience to observe and create that line."



The fragments of figures that appear in Lostutter's watercolors -- head and shoulders, and sometimes partial torsos -- are not, however, observed. All are imagined by the artist, who jots them in little notebooks he carries everywhere. The plumage of the birds, on the other hand, is faithful to what Lostutter saw in nature and many books. The same is true of the flowers that occasionally have appeared as adornments.

Once he grew as many as 200 orchids in his studio, drawing them for pleasure. He might have become a botanical artist or a 20th Century John James Audubon. He initially thought to do a watercolor for every bird known, but because of his painstaking way of working -- sketches followed by a color chart and preparatory studies, then weeks or months of patient execution -- he realized the goal was impossible. In any event, the conjunction of bird and man took him in another direction that often has been analyzed for psycho-sexual content and, as a result, has been misinterpreted.

"I don't want to be political about my work," Lostutter said. "I don't like political art, and think the more political it gets, the more boring it gets. But I did see what we were doing to nature. Every now and then, I'd read about a bird going extinct and think, oh, it can't be. Well, it was. It was going extinct because of our stupidity.

"Sometimes when people write about my work, they'll say the colors are so beautiful they draw you in, and then you all of a sudden realize what you're looking at, and sometimes it's not pleasant. That face staring back is kind of angry at you. I saw that as a way of philosophizing about how I felt. I didn't want to get deeply into it, saying, you know, that we're being such bad, bad people here on the face of the earth. But I did purposely pick some of those birds because they were exceptionally beautiful, and the technique and color are points of seduction to get you in."

### Dissecting the process

Six years ago, the present exhibition was planned to show how much work that seduction requires. Lostutter always has been interested in seeing an artist's process. Every one is different. Some are direct, spontaneous. His involves extensive preparation. He had saved all his preparatory works -- color charts, line drawings, everything. So when asked to do an exhibition by David Mickenberg, then director of the Mary and Leigh Block Museum of Art, Lostutter proposed one that would show his process.

"I always thought that Bob's work was elegant, visually stunning and intriguing in his depiction of himself and others as part bird, part human and all sensual," Mickenberg said. "He is, in one respect, the Stefano della Bella of the 20th/21st Century. His works are packed with intricately woven details, finely depicted lines and color that leave you wondering about the acuity of the artist's eye, his vision of nature and the nature of being human."

Lostutter worked on the show for the better part of a year, then had a heart bypass. Upon recovery, he received notice of a goodbye party for Mickenberg, who was going to the Davis Museum and Cultural Center at Wellesley College. Years passed



before the project was revived, by the Herron School of Art and Design in Indianapolis. Initially, Lostutter resisted. But director/curator David Russick, whom Lostutter knew when Russick worked at the Phyllis Kind Gallery in Chicago, prevailed. After two more years of organization, here it is. His only other retrospective was at the Renaissance Society of the University of Chicago 22 years ago.

Surveys of this sort get artists to look back but also, sometimes, forward. Lostutter, 66, thinks he may do some small oil paintings again, and he already has embarked on a series of watercolor homages to artists who have given him pleasure. Each piece will begin with a single word, for having previously added poems to paintings, Lostutter uses words like colors. "Lust" he has unexpectedly applied to painter Johannes Vermeer, "melancholy" to composer Richard Strauss. They are the first pieces to announce a new direction that he envisions as another extended series.

### Natural changes

"I think in repetition you find change," Lostutter said. "It's sort of a Zen thing. And I think it even goes back to as a very small child drawing with my grandmother. I'd sit in a bay window overlooking a lot with one big tree in it, and we'd continuously draw the same things in different colors. I'd cry, throw a tantrum, she later said, when we had to stop. I never wanted to quit drawing. So it started early.

"That was my mother's mother. My father's mother, who raised me, was a very independent woman. When I said I wanted to go to the SAIC, my family went nuts. She just stepped forward and said, 'Here's a checkbook. Go to Chicago. It's not a whole lot of money, but you can manage.' She showed me how to fill out the application, and I did. And I got accepted. Got off the train right down the street here and walked through those doors, up to the Monadnock building. On the south corner of Dearborn there were big plate-glass windows, and as I walked by, the sun was streaming through the city, and there was a woman in a hat standing in the window and there was a chair and it looked like a Hopper painting. I thought to myself: I'm home. And, sure enough, here I live."