

READER

Wild at Heart

Robert Lostutter at Carl Hammer, through January 2

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Artists seem to have thoroughly absorbed the dictum that each must find an original style--any tour of Chicago galleries reveals a lot of initially striking or unusual art. But on repeated viewing much of this work starts to seem ordinary: weird figures depicted with the subtlety of a comic book soon seem banal. Robert Lostutter's amalgams of human and avian forms, on the other hand, are created with such exquisite precision and care that prolonged attention only makes them seem more strange.

Perhaps the strangest--and strongest--of the 14 works at Carl Hammer, mostly watercolors, is the monochromatic *Trader of Green*, the larger of two works with that title. A man with green skin stands against a blank background, his bare chest facing us but his head in profile. Each breast has a green leaf over it, almost as if his skin were turning into leaves. His tilted and oddly pointed face suggests a bird, with swept-back hair standing in for feathers. But what really clinches this impression is a net of green cords drawn so tautly over his face that it depresses the skin: the man's face seems to want to burst its bounds and become even more elongated--even more birdlike.

Artists in tribal cultures have been blending human and animal shapes for thousands of years, suggesting a profound understanding of humans' animal natures. But most such figures lack the self-consciousness of Lostutter's. The bird/men of tribal carvings seem to inhabit some intermediate space between humans and nature, whereas the man in *Trader of Green* is pointedly bound--a wonderful metaphor for civilization: the grid of the net imposes geometry on an organic form, holding it back from what it might become. In that sense the cords are akin to the "good posture" forced on kids and to surveyors' plats, superimposed on the prairie to build our cities. The man's grotesquely bound face, the leaves on his chest, and his green skin all seem to argue that civilization denies fundamental parts of our nature.

These are powerful ideas, but more important is the way Lostutter brings them to life with the tiny details of his surfaces. The man's richly textured skin almost vibrates with tiny splotches of light and dark green, which combine with Lostutter's precision of line to give the figure a Dürer-like absoluteness. Like the other works in the show, *Trader of Green* resembles a scientific illustration; it also has a vivid monumentality though it's barely life-size. Indeed, the man's vividly colored form against the neutral background

seems almost to glow, a creature of fantasy that's authenticated by Lostutter's detailed rendering.

The painting's apparently nondescript background actually brings the figure closer to the natural world. The conventional view would be to see it as a neutral field, and at first I thought its variegated tans and grays simply reflected the texture of the paper. But bits of unpainted white paper around the edges reveal that Lostutter has applied different shades in tiny patches here just as he did to the figure. I began to see this empty space as crawling with textures, touchably alive, not unlike the man's very palpable skin.

A poem by Lostutter on the wall alongside the picture tends to support the idea that the figure is merging with his environment, saying he's "neck deep in a slivered pond" amid "underfoot slippery mosses weaving patterns." Just as humans have wild animals within, so apparently empty space can suggest lichen. The trader comes to seem a medium of exchange between birds and men, nature and humans, emptiness and nature--and it was when I started to see the "blank" space almost pivoting around him, the trader a kind of fulcrum, that the rest of Lostutter's work acquired its full power.

Born in Kansas in 1939, Lostutter, a longtime Chicagoan, has been pursuing his singular vision for decades. The show includes some smaller pieces, almost sketches, that suggest a catalog of nature, each showing perhaps one or two figures and one or two plants, some in black and white and some in color. But others seem to use sketchlike compositions to suggest meanings. Trader shows two almost identical faces side by side with green leaves on their cheeks; what looks like a tan bathing cap holds their hair in place, which would presumably otherwise shoot backward like the bird-tail hairdos of several other figures. The most prosaic interpretation is that these are successive attempts to get a face right, but their identical sizes and vertical positions on the paper give the sense of an inventory of nearly identical creatures.

The central figure in the larger *Neofinetia Falcata* is flesh-colored but no more realistic: partly covering his face, almost seeming to grow out of it, are several brightly colored overlapping shapes like petals--or feathers. The blue background is as tactile as the neutral background of *Trader of Green* but adds several plants floating in midair; one is about to blossom. These might be botanical sketches added to lend authenticity to a fantasy portrait--or signs that apparently empty space is teeming with new life.

In an excellent 1984 catalog essay, critic Dennis Adrian wrote that, in Lostutter's view, "Each of us is alone in the prison of the flesh [yet] our consciousness of separateness from nature does not excuse us from submission to its inexorable laws and processes." Lostutter refuses to choose between our existence as animals and our self-consciousness, which seems alien to the rest of nature--instead his visions bridge this split. In the small but exquisite *Night II* a face seems to be covered by a bluish mask a bit like the bathing caps of *Trader*, pressing against the pointed nose as if binding the face in its human form. But then one notices that a cordlike line separating the two halves of the face at the mouth is itself flesh-colored, suggesting that the flesh-colored surface is the false skin, the deep blue the figure's underlying nature. Of course the point is that the figure doesn't

have a single "true nature"--he's the poetic evocation of a gulf that opened the first time
an artist scratched a picture on a stone, a gulf that can never really be closed.