

Feathered Friends—or Foes?

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At Halloween, we treat ourselves to the darker sides of life, to movies and stories about ghosts, werewolves, murderers and monsters. But I've always found the subtler side of scary more frightening—the surreal and the supernatural over the gruesome and gory.

There's certainly something mysterious, and unmistakably beautiful, about the work of Robert Lostutter, which is celebrated in *The Singing Bird Room of Robert Lostutter*, an exhibition running through January 6 at the Madison Museum of Contemporary Art.

The show features more than thirty drawings, prints, watercolors and oil paintings the Chicago artist created from the 1960s to the late 1990s. The most recurring theme is a man with a face covered in colorful feathers—a fantastical man-bird hybrid whose mannerisms take on characteristics of both species. He's in turns alluring, vulnerable and dangerous.

In the early 1970s, Lostutter began traveling to Mexico, where he was drawn to tropical birds with vibrant feathers. He later took trips to the Caribbean and Southeast Asia, encountering other colorful birds and exotic flowers.

In "African Paradise Flycatcher," a watercolor from 1981, a man leans his head over his right shoulder, revealing a face of blue feathers and long brown plumes extending from behind his ear. The pageantry of this display seems like the natural behavior of a bird.

The bird-man in the 1974 lithograph "The Birds of Heaven 14: Red-Fronted Conure" has a face of green and red feathers. His head is tilted slightly down, with his eyes narrowed and teeth exposed. He looks angry, ready to attack.

Lostutter's man-bird hybrids range in attitude, and his works vary greatly in size. While his large-scale paintings and lithographs are powerful, I found his small, exquisitely detailed watercolors and drawings the most moving. Indeed, Lostutter is an incredible draughtsman; the crispness of his lines and the precision of the feathers he depicts are worth a close look.

An interesting inclusion in the show are sketches and preparatory drawings for Lostutter's grand paintings. Studies for "Trader of Green" hang alongside the 1998 watercolor of a man-lotus hybrid in the center of the exhibition. Leaves form on the green man's chest, his hair looks like grass and stem-like twine wraps his face. Opposite the painting, a poem the artist wrote in 2005 appears on the wall. It ends with:

I fold and crease this day from end to end I leave the table—I leave the moon take a deep breath and close this night and enter forever the singing bird room

Another theme in Lostutter's art is man in distress. In a small, untitled colored pencil work from 1983, a masked man hangs from ropes above stylized flames. And the exhibition ends with two large oil paintings from the 1970s. In one, a man is suspended in the air, with flames shooting up from his torso; his hands, face and torso are covered in a pale blue satin-like material. While both men are obviously in pain, they're depicted with an elegance.

As with all of the works in the show, the viewer is left with questions. Who are these men? Are they safe? Are they happy? Are they dangerous? Lostutter doesn't provide answers, and ambiguity lingers. It feels almost like a haunting.

The Singing Bird Room of Robert Lostutter runs through January 6 at MMoCA. For more information, visit mmoqa.org.