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Manifestations of Nature in the work of David Kroll

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The situations in David Kroll paintings seem simple enough; creatures, mainly birds or fish, with occasional reptiles or insects, perched on or nearby, in flight or otherwise airborne, close by vases or bowls, almost always placed in outdoor settings. These containers are mainly ceramic, referencing histories of East Asian or Western European porcelains, but on occasion birds' nests are depicted. In Kroll's early work the occasional old book or a row of books appear, those understood to be vessels filled with thought. In more recent work the vases or bowls are often filled with flower bouquets. Creatures and containers alike are rendered in foregrounds close to the bottom edge of scenes, on shallow shelves or natural clearings. In the far distance we see mountains, forests, copses of trees in a prairie or, behind several images of fish in mid-air, bodies of water or indeterminate fog. I offer this itemization of visible elements in Kroll's work in order to stress the importance of what is not to be seen: human beings, crucially, and a middle distance which would provide space for such more imposing human works as architecture, roadways, or narrative.

From ancient Egypt on, the history of depictions of animals is also a history of their human attributes. Whether as homage, in ennobling paintings of horses, lions, or eagles—all of which appear in one or another of Edward Hicks's many versions of *Peaceable Kingdom*—or as satire—Edwin Landseer's dog-as-jurist in *Laying Down the Law* comes to mind—animal temperaments are implicit within explicit artistic attention to the differences of physiognomy that mark the otherwise unbridgeable distance between us and other creatures. The creatures in Hicks or Landseer are either shown in assemblies or else as participants in distinct human social practices. As such they lend their natural likenesses to images concerned with social aspects of human nature. At the other end of this spectrum we see scientific illustration with greater or lesser degrees of compositional embellishment. John James Audubon's *Birds of America* folios both accurately delineates many North American bird species while situating them in metaphorically untrammelled wilderness. Kroll's painted birds, fish, and occasional lizards, are neither persons inside feathered or scaly costumes nor merely scientific examples of creature countenance.

The flowers in Kroll's paintings are not still on branch or bush; they've been gathered and arranged in those vessels but by whom we cannot know. The artist favors bunches of petaloid cluster blooms such as peonies, chrysanthemums, globular roses, and perhaps zinnias or ranunculus. We're familiar with floriography, the symbolic glossary of flowers, in which each different species represents a signal of the human feeling accompanying gifts of blooms. But like Kroll's birds or fish, the flowers in his paintings serve no cryptic ends.

Everything is in place, then, in Kroll's pictures, for deducing hidden meanings; secret messages of fundamentally human sentiment. Since there are no people here, a conventional interpretive approach would be to assign human characteristics to the creatures that are present, but these creatures aren't pantomiming human gestures. Their alertness is true to their nature, not ours, and when we consider those Koi carp swirling in midair, the configuration of their impossible levitation is not a diagram of ulterior motives. Where, then, do we turn to figure out what's going on?

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The great Dutch still-life painters of the 17th century often linked their arrangements of goods and relics to moral instruction about the limitations of wealth and secular knowledge in the shadow of human mortality. Such works, under the term *Vanitas*, encouraged viewers to consider the permanence of religious values and repent their “vanity.” Cut flowers in such still-lives are emblems of transience. Those blooms will die but the love inspiring the gift of them will continue into the future. Kroll is well aware of the iconography of *Vanitas* or *memento mori* painting, but his paintings aren’t piled high with luxury items. There is a juxtaposition of brevity and plausible permanence between the birds, for example, and the vessels on which they perch, but a bird’s awareness of the present moment is quite different from human awareness that worldly things are fleeting. Kroll is not a moralist; his deliberately spare arrangements of pictorial elements are a way to push back against our yearning to find a narrative in these exquisitely crafted scenes.

I pointed earlier to something also missing in Kroll’s paintings, a middle distance capable of connecting their foreground theatricality with background landscape, and here, we surmise, is where an interpretive key may be found. To draw a literary comparison, Kroll’s compositions are episodic in nature, like the tradition of the picaresque novel, whose vividness arises from loosely connected scenes rather than from arduously developed plots. What keeps our attention, whether in picaresque writing or in Kroll’s paintings, is careful consideration of the conditions of observation. We can luxuriate in Kroll’s tender treatment of light, contrast, and texture, without being pulled away by the responsibilities of decipherment. The picaresque in writing is commonly associated with adventures in travel, but for the most part Kroll doesn’t give us roads to the horizon. That abyss between foreground and the far away swallows up storylines. Two exceptions are the pair of hilly forest scenes with streams tumbling over rocks directly toward the picture plane. The dark vegetation along the sides of each painting draws our attention upward and inward to the glow of a hidden sun. Kroll has titled these *Woodland Landscape with eggs* (*eleven* in one case; *two* in the other). The shelf-like foreground seems hardly wide enough for the eggs or the birds that hatched them. This shelf disappears into a darkness that almost obscures the horizontal line which demarcates its inner edge. This edge, however, raises a subtle paradox of illusion for us. Has Kroll painted from nature or has he painted a landscape painting behind the shelf? Throughout this body of work we are encouraged to pay attention to the superb interplay among things, beings, and environment that are the center of Kroll’s art.