



Nothing is what it seems to be in the work of San Francisco artist Darren Waterston. Barely-there orbs ooze from one configuration to the next, appearing to free float like half remembered dreams of water. Delicate flowers spreading open their petals are revealed to be lacerations. The wings of moths disappear into a murky sky. In these gorgeous meditations made of painterly erosion and creation, blossom and decay become one and the same. Although Waterston has incorporated figural elements into his painted canvases, they've rarely been the focus. Until now. In his newest work,

Waterston has seized upon the subject of animals associated with Saint Jerome in Medieval and early Renaissance paintings. "I draw a lot of aesthetic and intellectual gravity out of that time period," explains Waterston, who has reproduced the more than sixty creatures associated with the Saint. Saint Jerome is known for, among other things, translating the Bible, pulling a thorn from a lion's paw, and retiring to the Syrian Desert where he had but scorpions and wild beasts for company. For his upcoming show at Seattle's Greg Kucera Gallery titled "Kingdom," Waterston examines how clerics of the day perceived both good and bad qualities of animals then transmitted them via religious art to a primarily illiterate audience. Image supplanted word as animals stepped in to warn of the folly of human experience.

Waterston employs a variety of paint materials—encaustics, varnishes, tree saps, plant resins, traditional oil pigments and acidic materials—placed over a chalk-based gesso applied in several layers. In his past work, he used materials to erode layers of paint, revealing multiple transparent swathes of color beneath drips and orbs, and thereby suggesting a life of nuances. Little if anything in Waterston's world is perceived as black and white, yet in this latest body of work the black forms of animals are set off against a stark white background. If the color scheme suggests firm demarcation, the subject matter does not: Cranes, crabs and foxes seem to burst forth from the paper, their disparate limbs, jaws and claws irreversibly joined. "I loved the ways some early manuscript animals weren't romanticized or domesticated, but rather menacing. Nature was a dangerous thing—if you went out in the woods you would get eaten. The sublime is much bigger than you—it dazzles but it can bring your demise."

Born in Fresno, California, Waterston spent part of the '80s in Germany: first at the Akademie der Kunst in Berlin, and later as an apprentice at the Fachhochschule für Kunst in Munster, Germany, restoring illuminated manuscripts. It became a bit of an obsession. "I'm a big collector of books and look at a lot of early forms of books and how they hold

information and images." Waterston, who works on a dozen or more paintings at a time, finds similar data in his canvas. As he explains, "I look to one to give me information about another."

As if to counter his sharply delineated gouache-on-paper silhouettes, Waterston has also created larger oil-on-wood panels on which animals slip in and out of substantiality, dissipating like specters even as the audience tries to hold them fast. "Early Renaissance paintings conjure up a feeling of forbidding forests—that nature is suspect, a great danger and great mystery. It's how I use landscape in my work—nature gone awry, or that nature is not an idealized space. I set out to create images that have a seductive aesthetic, but whatever ideas we have of beauty I still want to imbue with simultaneous more subversive, contrasting elements. Our own ideas around beauty are so unstable."

—SUZANNE BEAL

*"Darren Waterston: Kingdom" will be on view from April 7 – May 28, 2011, at Greg Kucera Gallery, in Seattle, WA. [www.gregkucera.com](http://www.gregkucera.com)*

"LEO," 2011  
OIL ON WOOD PANEL, 72" x 60"  
PHOTO: COURTESY GREG KUCERA GALLERY, SEATTLE

