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*Wild Thing: Celebrating a Forgotten Animal Artist*

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It is common to find people drawn to the majesty and mystery of animals. We bring them into our homes, visit them at zoos, watch them in nature specials, and donate to their charities to protect them from human created dangers. Our bond with animals is strange in some respects, because no matter how many different ways people have animals in their life, they must use other tactics to communicate with us, always leaving something for us to understand. In the case of artist Walter Addison, he spent his life surrounded by animals, using them as muses for his art during a time when other artists were

rejecting literal subjects in their work. This month, a new exhibit at Cade Tompkins Projects re-introduces the artwork of Walter Addison to the public and celebrates his legacy as an outstanding animal artist.

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As a teenager, Addison moved from the forests of Washington State where he was raised to the bustle of growing New York City in the 1930s to become an artist. He arrived for the construction of the ground floors of the Empire State Building and Rockefeller Center. After several years creating work and earning notable fellowships, Addison was hired for a position at the Bronx Zoo to paint the animals that inhabited the largest metropolitan zoo in the country.

Dr. William G. Conway, a former director, came to the Bronx Zoo as an assistant curator of birds in 1956 at age 27. It is clear from the rich watercolor sketches in the exhibition that the birds were a personal favorite of Addison's. It is fun to think that when young Conway arrived and met Addison that the two bonded over their mutual love of the animals. Conway said of the artist, "Addison's art seems to capture the very essence of the animal soul- the intrinsic living, fructifying Holy Spirit captured by the ancient painters at the Lascaux Caves 30,000 years ago."

The essence of the animal's soul is exactly what comes through in his work. Addison captures the birds' vibrant colors and mannerisms as if you can hear them squawking, in full conversation with one another and anyone else who would listen. His painting of monkeys in the exhibit seems to be a compounded sketch of several different monkeys, each with a captivating look in their eye. The monkey in the lower right hand of the canvas is looking right into you, invoking the same feeling a patron would feel if they were standing in front of a monkey in its' pen rather than a picture.

With the city in a period of physical change in the 1930s, it became the muse for many, including Addison, though in a unique way. Instead of his work showing the city literally, his animals became stylized and capture the essence of the art deco trend emerging throughout New York in addition to the majesty of the zoo's animals. Addison's depiction of the sea lions appear to be carved out of stone with chiseled features with minimal detail but with a translucent touch only watercolor can provide. Addison regularly used watercolors versus other mediums for his work. Even though watercolor can be difficult to master, it can be easier to set up and tote around locations such as a zoo. It is easy to envision Addison wandering

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around different areas of the park with his sketchbook and watercolor palette in tow to set up at a moment's notice to capture the animals at their various enclosures.

Addison eventually moved out of New York and into a converted blacksmith's barn in Washington Depot, Connecticut. He passed away in 1982 leaving behind not only his family, but also his work, which remained in storage until now. This exhibit is a bit of a rescue mission and perhaps isn't a complete retrospective of Addison's work since there is no knowing how many sketches were actually made and how many have been lost due to time and damage, even some of the images in the show have required some repair. It is possible that more of Addison's work remains in archives since the work created by Addison during his tenure as resident artist at the Zoo would arguably belong to them. That argument could possibly explain the work in this show, which varies in detail and level of completion. Even if we are only seeing a small portion of his entire body of work, we still are able to see the artist's creative spirit behind every animal in the room. Addison's images of the animals may not be the ground breaking abstract expressionist work of his contemporaries, but that may have been a reason for the successes achieved during his own time. The common visitor in the 1950s, walking through Macy's where his animals sculptures spent time in the window displays or past his mural at the New York City Aquarium, would have instantly recognized what they were looking at and the artist's skill rather than be challenged by the work of the abstract expressionists.

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This could also explain why Addison was forgotten by art history; commercial can be such a dirty word. It is of no relevance now to question Walter Addison's absence from Dr. Molholt's Intro to History of Art and Architecture at Brown. Sadly, this is not the first time this has happened to a talented and respected artist and it will not be the last, but this show for our enjoyment rather than for us to question a deeper cerebral meaning. Even though Addison's work may not be hanging in any of the major museums, it does not take away from the treasures he has left behind.

*Walter Addison: Wild Things* is on view at Cade Tompkins Projects, Providence, Rhode Island  
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