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WALTER ADDISON'S ARTISTIC MENAGERIE AT CADE TOMPKINS PROJECTS,

Call of the Wild

by Greg Cook

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Walter Addison's paintings transport you back in time, to the jazzy hopping New York of the years bookending World War II. And more specifically to the city's Bronx Zoo, where Addison (1914-1982) was "lead artist" in the 1940s. He paints monkeys, lions, and birds in a sturdy, muscular art deco-influenced style that combines streamlined modernist design with a realist attention to sinewy animal anatomy. His renderings on view in "Wild Things: Paintings and Sculpture from 1940-1968" at Cade Tompkins Projects (198 Hope Street, Providence, through July 27) are rooted in careful observation but he often gives the critters an extra bit of character, as in a late '40s watercolor of impetuous monkeys leaping across the back of a mildly annoyed hippopotamus.

Addison's name isn't familiar from history books or museums, though he painted murals in the zoo's animal houses, New York's Governor Clinton Hotel, and the New York City Aquarium that were seen by innumerable visitors. He's a talented journeyman — with a thing for critters, including the menagerie of dogs, cats, raccoons, and skunks that he kept in his East Village loft and at the Washington Depot, Connecticut, home where he moved in 1965.

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His earliest works here are bird studies originally painted to illustrate an ornithology book. The gouache and ink painting *Hummingbirds* from around 1940 is a sharp series of vignettes of bright green specimens perched on the ends of branches rendered with extraordinary realist detail and sense of life.

His later work is more stylized. *Monkeys* (c. 1945) is a brushy, quick-feeling painting of a quartet of monkeys floating and flying through an expressionist jungle. The monkeys don't really hang from or perch on anything. And ends of arms disappear. It might be a study of monkeys worked up into a more polished picture by adding in a loose background. But the strange space is part of what makes the painting intriguing.



Addison's style exemplifies pre-World War II American art — the muscular modernist realism of Regionalists like Thomas Hart Benton and John Steuart Curry and Works Progress Administration art graphics. A male lion lounging on savanna boulders and a female lion behind him licking her fur clean in the watercolor *King and Queen of the Jungle* (c. 1950) could be chiseled from stone. Then Addison adds the personality of picture book critters — from the worried eyes of a glazed ceramic leopard from 1948 to the jaunty posture of a grinning 2½-foot-tall plaster penguin.

EXTRA ORDINARY DETAIL
Hummingbirds.

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His paintings might also bring to mind Charley Harper's sleek midcentury wildlife graphics for magazines and national parks posters or the taxidermied animal dioramas that Carl Akeley designed for Chicago's Field Museum and New York's American Museum of Natural History in the early 20th century — though Addison doesn't have such a memorably distinct style.

Painting the zoo beasts, Addison doesn't depict cages but you can feel their edges nonetheless. The animals are so neatly grouped and staged — like a mid-'40s painting of a tightly packed group of deer lying near a river or a 1937 watercolor of haughty gang of sea lions hauled out on an island that might bring to mind New York's Central Park Zoo. *White Crane & Butterfly* from around 1948 depicts a crane glimpsed between big green tropical leaves and dangling vines that frame the action like theatrical curtains. The bird's body is a delicate S-curve balancing on long legs. A violet and purple butterfly flits over the plants along a river's shore. And the bird, still and severe, wading in the shallows, has its eye on us.



As a companion to the Addison paintings, Tompkins presents new drawings and prints by Providence's Alec Thibodeau. They're fine-lined pen drawings of a butterfly flying near a pitcher plant or a mole popping out of a hole or a mouse perched on the back of a toad as a flaming ship sinks in the background. While Addison is all nostalgia and charm, Thibodeau's style is tight and illustrative and surreal. Screenprints depict a rhinoceros breathing blue flame under a blue-green sun and a running, flaming elephant. His crisp, precise hatched lines freeze the creatures in place, turning them into mystical icons

MYSTICAL ICONS A detail from
Thibodeau's *Trust*.