

Tom Uttech: *Adisokewinini*

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The List Gallery is pleased to present *Adisokewinini* (an Ojibwe word for tale-teller), an exhibition of new paintings by Tom Uttech. These visionary landscapes, many of them teeming with wildlife, spring from his lifelong communion with nature. His compelling narratives synthesize observations he has made as a nationally recognized artist and former Professor of Art at the University of Wisconsin; a birdwatcher who has repeatedly counted over 300 species annually; a conservationist who spent the past twenty years converting farmland to prairie habitats; a photographer who between 1967 and 1983 shot over a thousand rolls of film on wilderness trips; and a frequent hiker in the northern woods and wetlands of Wisconsin, Minnesota, and Quetico Provincial Park in Ontario, Canada. Revealing the abundance of life he has witnessed on such journeys, Uttech re-connects us with states of nature and being that are hauntingly unfamiliar and increasingly rare.

Uttech's illusionistic and detailed rendering of flora and fauna animates every inch of his landscapes and even extends to his painted frames, implying a ceaseless elaboration of life that can not be fully recounted or contained. Yet his fidelity to detail is always in the service of rhythms and patterns that unify his compositions and emphasize his profound emotional and spiritual responses. For example, in *Maskegowok*, the swirling patterns of fallen leaves and limbs and the undulating calligraphy of tree branches emphasize the interrelatedness of all forms, both animate and inanimate.

Such works not only celebrate the beauty and specificity of particular ecosystems; they also envision them as inseparable from one's own identity or presence. At times, the scenes suggest what Uttech describes as a self-portrait in landscape. In *Maskegowok*, a bear in the center of the composition confronts us, disrupting what

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might otherwise become a detached or voyeuristic response. Staring directly at the viewer, the bear mirrors our gaze, reminding us of our own attitude and viewpoint. Similarly, in *Kikinowijiwed* (an Ojibwe word for guide), a wolf perches on a stone in the center of the foreground as if embodying the mysteries of a moonlit forest bathed in swirling mists. The wolf and other totemic creatures that inhabit Uttech's paintings allude to forces greater than us; they offer the potential for guidance but also require a reciprocal response.

Similarly, the paintings in their entirety can prompt us to pursue a deeper understanding of nature and our place within it. Although Uttech's landscapes often feature a centrally placed animal, he frequently creates a dizzying array of alternate focal points: flying birds, swimming fish, roaming caribou and prowling wolves alternately appear and recede amid a panoply of contrasts, scale shifts, dramatic perspectives, and whirling clouds. Yet the simultaneity of information becomes neither decorative nor chaotic. Dramatic horizons and lighting together with compelling patterns, rhythms, and symmetries provide a countervailing sense of order and continuity.

As a result, many works appear paradoxically agitated and calm, both transitive and timeless. Such ambiguity, together with Uttech's portrayals of transitional times such as sunset, sunrise, or migratory upheaval, evokes liminal states—moments within our selves or societies—during which we experience the capacity for profound change. Moreover, works such as *NinMamakadendam* prompt us as viewers to transform our own habits of perception. Standing before the work, one gradually discovers flora and fauna that were hidden at first amid densely rendered textures, patterns, and shadows. Rewarding patient study, Uttech's paintings encourage our capacity for discovery and discernment.

Because Uttech's tales and titles evoke not only the landscape, but the native languages and traditions that inform his work, he emphasizes the partnership of art, ancient cultures, and nature in guiding us forward. Avoiding didactic parables,

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Uttech's paintings nevertheless offer lessons that must be interpreted over time. A tale-teller of both spirit and experience, Uttech eloquently conveys the interconnectedness of all creation.