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NYTIMES

**Arts | Westchester**

**Scenes From Nature, Buoyant and Surreal**

**A Review of ‘Hudson River Explorers,’ in Yonkers**

Holly Sears

**ON THE MOVE** “Elephants,” an oil painting by Holly Sears, is part of the series “Hudson River Explorers,” commissioned by the Metropolitan Transportation Authority to line the overpasses at the Metro-North station in Tarrytown.

**By SYLVIANE GOLD**

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Are the swooping falcons swimming, or are the darting catfish flying? And what about the floating coyote in their midst — is it lofted by air or by water? The delicate wash of blue behind them doesn’t really tell you; the one thing you can say for sure about the animals in [Holly Sears](http://www.hollysears.com/paintings.php)’s painting “Hawks” is that they are on the move.

“Ride,” in which a butterfly travels on a fish.

**Holly Sears**

“Swimmers,” about an unlikely menagerie.

That’s as it should be. The oil is part of a series, “Hudson River Explorers,” commissioned by the Metropolitan Transportation Authority and replicated on glass panels to line the overpasses at Tarrytown’s Metro-North station. So the work’s intended audience is going to be in motion — either dashing on and off trains or traveling up and down the Hudson Line. But until Oct. 13, the 11 paintings that form the basis for the glass panels can be contemplated in a more leisurely way at the [Hudson River Museum](http://www.hrm.org/) in Yonkers. And with their exquisitely detailed renderings of flora and fauna and their generous helpings of whimsy, they reward careful study.

Ms. Sears’s work reaches back to two deeply American traditions, the literal nature paintings of [John James Audubon](http://www.hrm.org/) and the fanciful “peaceable kingdom” images of [Edward Hicks](http://www.worcesterart.org/Collection/American/1934.65.html), and then upends them both. She asks us to look more closely at and think more seriously about the natural world by gently subverting our expectations, mixing familiar, abundant local species, like white-tailed deer and red-winged blackbirds, with more exotic, more endangered creatures, like elephants and polar bears. She also inverts scale — in “Ride,” the orange-and-black Painted Lady butterfly straddling a sturgeon is bigger than the crow hovering just above them; the black bears clinging to a log in “Undertow” would have trouble swallowing some of the outsize striped bass caught in the same current.

But as playful as these nature scenes are — and I defy you not to smile at “Swimmers,” with its intercontinental menagerie taking an unlikely dip in a rippling pool — Ms. Sears never condescends to her animals. They are not cute. They are not anthropomorphic. They are in every particular utterly themselves, rendered with accuracy and tremendous feeling for the shimmer of scales, the richness of fur, the gloss of feathers. The artist’s method of applying thin layers of color until she gets the density she wants lends some of the birds’ wings a transparency that mimics the blur of motion. And she captures the tremor in a river otter’s whiskers and the folds in a deer’s ear with eye-opening fidelity.

At the same time, these animals are utterly fantastic, characters from fables yet to be written: “The Bobcat and the Butterfly”; “The Catfish and the Coyote”; “The Seahorse and the Elephant.” Ms. Sears’s pachyderms, both African and Asian, are buoyant, weightless wonders. Her cats, both wild and domestic, love the water. In her Edenic universe, porpoises cavort with perching birds. Herons hover in midair with their long legs dangling straight down. And what exactly is that fuzzy little yellow chick doing beneath a catfish?

Because of the laminated-glass technique used to fabricate the panels for the station overpasses, many of the animals on view at the museum are cavorting on plain white backgrounds. But in the fully installed panels — the ribbon-cutting ceremony is scheduled for Sept. 14, after the morning rush — the beasts of “Hudson River Explorers” will exist in a more natural habitat. Some of the landscape elements are already present in “Owls,” “Herons” and several of the other paintings at the museum. In “Songbirds,” the bristling branches of a flowering mountain laurel are just as correct — in minute gradations of pink — and nearly as dynamic as the undulating line of flying orioles, cardinals, chickadees and blackbirds. The floating water lily pads and clumps of pickerelweed in “Passengers” give off a muted glow amid their reflections.

Ms. Sears depicts the particularities of plants and streams as carefully as she does those of animals. But it remains to be seen if the humans leaving and entering the Tarrytown train station will slow their journeys to join her and become Hudson River explorers, too. They’ll be missing a world of pleasure if they don’t.

“Holly Sears: Hudson River Explorers” is at the Hudson River Museum, 511 Warburton Avenue, Yonkers, through Oct. 13. Information: hrm.org or (914) 963-4550.