

## Currently Hanging

By Mario Naves • 03/01/04 12:00am

### Where the Wild Things Are

The paintings of Tom Uttech at Alexandre are steadfastly rooted in the local. He depicts panoramic scenes of densely wooded forests densely populated-at times absurdly overrun-by fauna. The forests are part of a protected wilderness area in Ontario, but the macro geography is less important to Mr. Uttech than his embrace of the particular: There's no place he'd rather be.

He paints with the precision of a naturalist. We're never in doubt that these often encyclopedic pictures are scientifically correct. The same goes for the depiction of light: Whether painting the sparest of rainbows or the northern lights, Mr. Uttech is true to the drama and sweep of the specific moment. Yet the paintings have been orchestrated with a decidedly unnatural theatrical flair. The animals loitering on the scene are acutely aware of themselves as objects of observation. At times, they look out at us resentfully, as if our presence were an encroachment on their territory. (Is there an eco-political moral buried in the pictures? The only animal not pictured is man.)

The gulf between viewer and image is unbridgeable, the distance emphasized by Mr. Uttech's touch, which keeps us at bay. And there's a mysterious recurring motif, also distancing: a lone black bear with a curious demeanor, standing on its hind legs. It's too close to being a cute gimmick-and after a couple of cameos, it's an annoyance. Not cute at all-in fact, arresting-is *Awassabang* (2003), which depicts the uniform migration of innumerable species of birds, all heading resolutely stage right.

Imagine pictures painted by the love child of Corot, John Frederick Kensett, John James Audubon, René Magritte and Jackson Pollock, and you'll have some idea of Mr. Uttech's unlikely and eccentric sensibility.

Tom Uttech: New Paintings is at Alexandre Gallery, 41 East 57th Street, until March 6.