

Rachael McCampbell

Returning to the Land

Questions by John Reed | Photography by Anthony Scarlati

I was totally unprepared for Rachael's recent exhibit at the Tinney Contemporary gallery. Sure, I had seen her work before, admired her strong compositions and bold use of natural colors, but her installation "Mystic Mother" stopped me in my tracks. It is beautiful and disturbing all at the same time. Part fairy tale, part horror story, and, just like the elephant in the middle of the room, it cannot be ignored. It seemed like a good place to start.

John Reed: I did not know how to respond to "Mystic Mother" when I first saw it. It's difficult to look at, and yet it looks vulnerable, almost childlike.

Rachael McCampbell: I'm glad you had a strong reaction to it. It is a memorial, a testament to extinction. I wanted to create awareness about our encroachment on wild habitats and the devastating results it has. Surrounding the sculpture are mirrors with etched images of extinct species such as the eastern elk, the passenger pigeon and the silver trout, among others. Each mirror has a word engraved on it such as "I", "YOU", "ME", "WE"—the idea being that you have to look at yourself to see the extinct species. The paintings surrounding the sculpture are all endangered North American species.

JR: It's monolithic in its size. How did you go about physically creating it?

RM: It's a collection of old jawbones, wings, skulls, feathers, eggs; you name it, it's in there. Most of it was donated by local farmers, cowboys and neighbors.

JR: The reaction to "Mystic Mother" has been very intense...

RM: Yes, absolutely. I saw that some people were even repulsed by it. But, I think that's a good thing; it's positive. I would hate to create art that was ignored. I want people to react. I want people to leave the show feeling hopeful about the species we have saved from extinction, yet remain aware of the work that needs to be done.

JR: Your love of the countryside and its natural beauty is very evident in your work.

RM: My mother loved art and was an amateur plein-air painter. She



"Land development in America is devouring our countryside at a rate of 365 acres per hour."



“...in the middle of the gallery, *Mystic Mother*, is a memorial... to extinction.”



ABOVE: *The Faith, The Soil, The Blood*, 38"x84" mixed media on paper inspiring to me. I feel that I'm thriving here.

knew a well-known East Tennessee artist, Jim Gray, who came to our house to teach a workshop and in a few fluid strokes showed me how to paint. I was hooked.

Another huge influence was the farm I grew up on. The natural beauty of it was awe-inspiring, and, like a Will Cather novel, the farm was a main character in my life, nurturing and feeding my senses. When county officials condemned the majority of our farm to build an industrial park, it broke my heart. That is why I care so much about the loss of large tracts of land in Tennessee and the wildlife living on them.

JR: You donated a percentage of your sales from the show to the Tennessee Land Trust.

RM: I did. I felt that was important. When I decided to do this show about endangered and extinct species, to raise awareness and hopefully money for a cause, it made sense to me to donate proceeds to the Land Trust.

There are concerned people all over Tennessee who have supported the Land Trust by protecting their family land and preserving these habitats forever. One of the greatest resources our state has is its natural beauty and wide-open spaces. If we divide it all up, sell it off and build on it, we will lose that beauty and charm forever. Land development in America is devouring our countryside at a rate of 365 acres per hour. What are we going to do about that?

JR: You recently returned to Tennessee after many years in California. Has that affected your work in any way?

RM: I often see deer, wild turkeys or hawks on my three-mile commute to my studio. I didn't see any of that living in Los Angeles for 22 years. There are constant reminders of the impermanence of life all around me here. From the fallen trees from last year's tornado to dead animals on the side of the road, all this feeds into the themes I work with. The seasons and changing weather patterns are also

But the move back also has a twinge of sadness for me. Just in the past five years the landscape has changed dramatically. There are subdivisions and strip malls going up with what seems to me to be little urban planning. In Tennessee alone, we are losing 180 acres of open lands to other uses every single day. Where does that wildlife go?

JR: That's not a very pretty picture.

RM: Well, it's not. But it's not all bad. There's hope, especially when you look at projects in Nashville like the development of the Gulch, which seems to be a model for smart urban growth. The Land Trust has protected over 41,000 acres of land across the state in the past ten years. It's reassuring to know that these lands will always be here for our grandchildren and for our wildlife as well.

JR: Your show at the Tinney Contemporary gallery was a real eye-opener for a lot of people, both in terms of the quality of the work and for the message your work presented.

RM: Thank you for that. I enjoyed it immensely, and yes, I think people resonated with the message and the cause. Look, saving our endangered species is important—for you, for me, for everyone. Ultimately I hope everyone who attended the show understands that we are all stewards of this planet, and each of us can do our part in our own individual way. My way is through my art.

JR: Your paintings present very real subject matter, yet they seem to have this dream-like quality to them.

RM: Funny you should say that because a lot of my paintings come to me as visual images as I'm falling asleep. Later, I sketch these ideas out and make studies. Then I build very crude layers of paint on the canvas to create texture. I keep going back in with charcoal and redrawing the original concept as it changes all the time. I like



ABOVE *Dreams of Bells Bend*, 72" x 96" acrylic on canvas

BELOW: *Imperiled Red Wolves*, 48" x 72", acrylic on canvas



Florida Key Deer 48" x 36" acrylic on canvas

to build up paint then sand it back down again—usually interesting things happen when you do that. I splash around and get messy with my art—working in an emotive, process-oriented way. It's fun not knowing what's going to happen next.

JR: And how has your style developed and evolved over the years?

RM: I began with figurative work, which I still do, but then moved into working with nature-based themes. I had a show several years ago in Los Angeles called "Wingscapes" for which I painted a series of birds. I experimented with painting only half of the bird, as if it were either rebirthing or dying, either one. The allegorical quality of this concept intrigued me. I began to paint about personal issues humans deal with by using flying birds and running horses as the embodiment of those ideas. Stylistically my work went from tightly controlled brushwork and realistic imagery years ago to more abstracted and highly textured work. Now, I like to mix realism with abstraction. It keeps the painting moving and alive.

Whatever I paint, I try to put myself—my emotions and experiences—into it. I think people sense this somehow when they look at it. If my artwork can move a person to feel something, either the imagery or the subject matter, or elicit some unexpected feelings within them, then I believe I have accomplished something. I love it when art is transformative. That's powerful.

JR: You have a show February 20, 2010, at the Parthenon called *Women in Mythology*. The feminine seems to play an important role in your work.

RM: Yes it does, but you're going to have to wait for the show to see why.

For additional information about Rachael McCampbell, contact Tinney Contemporary gallery at 255-7816 or visit www.rachaelmccampbell.com.