



Rachael McCampbell



Equine Spirit

Artist Rachael McCampbell takes on the power of the horse for Steeplechase

BY STEPHANIE STEWART-HOWARD

THE LAST TIME I SAW ARTIST RACHAEL McCampbell, Ron Manville and I were styling her dressed as a Greek goddess on the banks of the river in Leiper's Fork that had recently flooded her home and studio, and much of the rest of the town, for a *Nashville Lifestyles* article. It was late summer 2010, and she was preparing to show a collection of haunting, mythic subjects at the Parthenon. She looked appropriately ethereal, for all she'd recently gone through. Plenty of water, literally and figuratively, has gone under the bridge in two years, and now McCampbell's name is everywhere, since she's the featured artist for the Iroquois Steeplechase this month.

When I'd interviewed her before, I'd been taken by the animal art that hung on her studio walls—pieces she and friends had only barely managed to save from the rising waters of the flood. The pieces gave life and energy to the animals represented on the canvases, and perhaps the most astonishing were her images of horses.

That being the case, it was no surprise to me to learn McCampbell had been selected to create an image to represent Steeplechase this year. "I think there's something about horses in action for me," says McCampbell. "It's the sheer energy that effects me. I sometimes do paint them in repose, but usually, they're in motion."

She's referencing the wonderful final image, "Flight," the one we'll see on every card, brochure and T-shirt, of the horses nearly flying over the hedges, jockeys lifted by the physics of the motion—capturing that moment when all the power seems to sail through the air, and you catch your breath, wondering if they'll set down to earth again, before they suddenly do, and the electric forward impetus of the running horses resumes.

McCampbell chose to focus on a graphic image for Steeplechase, emphasizing a diagonal line, one that could work for all those posters, shirts and race day cards that she knew could be cropped and still hold together as a painting.

The image also reflects Steeplechase as McCampbell has viewed it on her own for the past five years. Each time, she's had a press pass and taken her zoom lens, getting as close as she could to the primal energy only released when the horses are actually running. It's quite a different feel to the event for her than for those of us who go for the social aspects.

It wasn't her own photo that she based the painting on, but one of Steeplechase official photographer Tod Marks' images. Marks, as it happens is the only one able to place a camera in the hedges, and thus managed to capture the energy McCampbell wanted to depict.

"I want the viewer to get as close to that athlete—and those horses are athletes—as they can get. I want you to have the sense you can feel the breeze as they go past you, feel the kicked up dirt clods as they hit you. I want you right up there."

McCampbell waxes poetic on the subject of horses, giving us a sense of the living muscle, the glistening coats of the animals, and it's easy to see that for her there is something totemic about the horse. It becomes a manifestation of strength, energy, effort and power, emanating something positively electric. And with this sense, she underlines the real reasons we are still drawn to horse racing and horse culture in an era where the horse as source of transport has long been forgotten. McCampbell sees the horse as athlete, as totem, as embodiment of the physical power of being alive. And that makes for something special in the paintings she creates as a result.

If you want to see more of McCampbell's horse art, you can start with her new equine art show at Belle Meade Plantation opening May 3 and running through the end of the month. (Come to the free opening on May 3 from 5:30-7:30 p.m., bellemeadplantation.com or visit rachaelmccampbell.com).

After that, she tells us she's working on a show based on drawings she did in Italy, inspired by the poetry of Mary Oliver. "I'm approaching this one backwards," she says. "I'll complete the show first, then I'll worry about the timing and location. It's important to get all the details right."

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