

Nature draws artist back to Tennessee

Conservation inspires collaboration with gallery, Land Trust

By Michelle Jones
FOR THE TENNESSEAN

After 22 years in Los Angeles, where she still maintains a studio, painter Rachael McCampbell moved back to Tennessee, settling in Leiper's Fork. This change of scenery inspired her latest project, *Endangered Heritage: Nature in the Balance*, a collaboration with The Land Trust of Tennessee and Tinney Contemporary.

The idea, says McCampbell, is to “create awareness about the disappearance of lands, and therefore of the inhabitants — the animals and the birds.” A percentage of sales of the works will go to the Land Trust.

To that end, McCampbell has made 15 new paintings depicting endangered species of North America, including the Florida cougar, the Nashville Crayfish and, as in the paintings *Dreams of Bell's Bend*, whooping cranes.

This last one was inspired by the landing of two cranes at Bell's Bend this past fall. “The development in Bell's Bend has been a controversy,” McCampbell says. “I just wanted to spotlight; let's look at these areas and focus on this beautiful endangered wildlife and how can we preserve that to keep it here.”

While these paintings feature McCampbell's dreamlike style — “I dream about it, then I get up and sketch it” — they are a bit more reality-based than the equine paintings for which she is known. (Some of those paintings will also be displayed in Tinney's lobby gallery during this show.)

“They're realistic with touches of abstraction,” she says of the new works. “I'll focus on getting a few of the faces really real and then the rest kind of gets



Rachael McCampbell draws inspiration for her paintings from the countryside in Leiper's Fork, where she now resides. JIMMY STRATTON / MUSIC CITY PHOTO

very textured and loosens up.”

She also leaves areas up to interpretations. “I have areas where the animal is not all the way finished,” she says. “So, the question is: Is the animal disappearing, or it is being drawn back in? And lots of time in these paintings there's a ghosted image that you just have to look for of an animal in it.”

McCampbell describes her style as “emotive-based.” “I like to get in there and scrape and sand and splash paint on and then cover that up and splash again.”

One piece in this show allowed McCampbell to do something completely different: It's an 8-foot-8-inch-tall sculpture incorporating bones, antlers and other natural material.

“It's an edgy piece,” McCampbell says, laughing. “It was fun to go that big.”

She also got lots of help from her neighbors in Leiper's Fork.

“I just asked farmers and people I know for help and, sure enough, I'd come down to my studio and there'd be a big box of

bones greeting me,” she says. “And people calling me and saying: Hey, there's a rotted carcass out here, do you want it?” she laughs.

She describes the piece as a “totem to extinction.” Once it's installed in the gallery, it will also include five mirrors, each featuring an engraving of an extinct animal and a word — “my, us, we, you, I.” The idea is that you have to look at yourself when you look at the extinct animal,” McCampbell says. A plaque tells when the animal became extinct.

McCampbell says growing up on a farm in East Tennessee has been perhaps the greatest influence on her work.

“There were your parents and then there was the land and it was as nurturing as any parent, it was just an amazing experience to grow up in nature,” she says. That aspect has never left and I think that's why no matter where I've lived, the imagery of Tennessee and farm-life and animal life is just always kind of percolating back there.”

If You Go

What: *Endangered Heritage*, paintings and sculpture by Rachael McCampbell

Where: Tinney Contemporary, 237 Fifth Ave. N.

When: Saturday-April 25; artists' reception 6-9 p.m. Saturday

Hours: 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Tuesday-Saturday

Admission: free

Contact: 255-7816 or tinneycontemporary.com

That connection is especially strong now that she's back.

“My drive to work consists of passing horses and wild turkeys, when they're around, and then seeing a hawk sitting right there on the fence post as you're going by.”

These fresh impressions, concerns over vanishing open spaces and memories of her family ceding 425 acres of their 700-acre farm to TVA led McCampbell to *Endangered Heritage*.

And then there were the deer. Last summer when visiting the area during one of her house searches, McCampbell was struck by the number of dead deer she saw. She took photographs and then worked them into her paintings back in Los Angeles. “It just started the wheels turning about all that,” she says.

Later, in Leiper's Fork, she sketched out a 3-and-a-half-foot-by-7-foot mural on a roll of paper. “It's got different animals and birds . . . the way I paint with (things) kind of drawn in and disappearing in it,” she says. “It's got a lot of movement . . . horses running and birds flying . . . that's how it started, I painted that first.”

McCampbell hopes this show will start conversations about preserving land and ensuring that development proceeds in planned, responsible ways. “If that happens, I will be so happy,” she says. “That tops selling anything. This to me is the entire value of the show, to create awareness.”