

Art People: Turi MacCombie | painter

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Turi MacCombie has long been drawn to animals; the Amherst watercolorist enjoys painting outdoor scenes but prefers filling them with creatures ranging from birds and bears to foxes and sheep.

“There’s more to react to,” she says. “I like the idea of a landscape that’s animated.”

MacCombie, a former children’s book illustrator, invests her creatures with a certain majesty. For one thing, her canvasses can be very large — say, 60 inches by 40 inches — and her paintings are rich in detail. From the ripples and gradations of fur on a bear, to the varied shading of a bird’s wing, MacCombie brings precise lines and brushstrokes to a medium that’s generally better known for more abstract images.

“I love the immediacy of it,” she says of watercolor, a quick-drying paint she mixes with small amounts of gouache. And, she notes, there’s the unpredictability of how a painting will turn out, given the way water actually spreads such paint on a canvas: “There’s always this element of ‘How’s this going to work?’ ... you’re not in complete control.”

In her most recent exhibit, at R. Michelson Galleries in Northampton, MacCombie has brought a personal note to her work. “Confrontations,” a series of paintings showing ravens interacting with different mammals, reflects the emotional struggle she went through when her daughter, Juliana Spear, died unexpectedly at age 40 a few years ago.

After that death, MacCombie, who also paints rich close-ups of flowers, initially painted a sad-looking chimpanzee that clutches its head while a white dove hovers just above it. Then she tried to work on a large painting of a rhododendron but found herself stymied.



“I had to drag myself to the studio to do this big, happy painting ... and I just couldn’t face it,” she says. “I went to a grief counselor and explained the problem, and she said ‘Do something that has some meaning for you.’ ”

MacCombie responded with “Bull with Raven,” which shows a raven, wings spread and beak open, looking darkly at a bull, which looks to the side, seemingly perplexed and ill at ease. “That was sort of the onslaught I felt,” she says.

“Confrontations” reveals a progression in MacCombie’s emotional journey over the next two years, from a sense of loss and conflict to redemption and acceptance. The paintings show a flock of ravens seeming to harass solitary elks, foxes and other animals in spare but luminous winter landscapes; later works depict the larger animals interacting more peaceably with the birds.

“Eventually they start to have a conversation,” MacCombie says.

The exhibit also includes smaller studies of ravens, as well as a few of chickadees, their feathers bright against bare tree branches. “I just woke up one day and said, ‘I’m going to paint chickadees,’ ” she says with a laugh. “I was just drawn to their sweetness and lightness.”

That might have been a moment when she’d come to terms with her loss, MacCombie notes, a theme that’s also showcased in the exhibit’s last large painting: an enormous, reflective-looking grizzly bear crouches in the snow, peering down at two tiny chickadees looking back at the bruin.

“It’s a look of compassion,” she says simply, “and of peace.”

— Steve Pfarrer

Turi MacCombie’s “Confrontations” will be on view through May 31 at the R. Michelson Galleries, 132 Main Street, Northampton. An opening reception will take place April 11 from 6 to 8 p.m.