

Where illusion and reality live together

Elizabeth Cook-Romero | The New Mexican



Susan McDonnell: *Meadow*, 2006, egg tempera on panel, 24 x 15.5 inches

Images courtesy Kludia Marr Gallery

Artists often traveled with such European explorers as Capt. James Cook. Evidence of their voyages fills old natural-history books and influenced Victorian volumes illustrated with engravings of seashells, fish, and grasses arranged into striking compositions. Susan McDonnell first saw such 19th-century books while visiting a used-book store in England. “They have these beautiful illustrations — sometimes whole scenes — that are showing one part of the world what another part of the world looks like,” she said.

In a less dramatic way, she said, she is doing the same thing. McDonnell records the flora and fauna of her Los Angeles neighborhood — an environment she calls “domesticated nature.” *Susan McDonnell — Still Lives: New Work* opens Friday, April 6, at Kludia Marr Gallery. Three paintings in the exhibit feature a turtle that lives in a pond at a nearby office park. Most of the other plants and creatures live in her studio garden.

McDonnell’s paintings are no mere imitation of the art of centuries past. Her medium, egg tempera, was developed by the 13th century, but the way McDonnell begins a painting would have seemed like insanity back then. “When I first start the paintings, I don’t know what they are going to be,” she said. “It’s just materials; it’s just about combining pigments and seeing how they react to each other — putting them in the bathtub and rinsing them off. It is a complete exploration of the pigments, and I let that determine what I’m going to find.”

Egg tempera is paint made of pigment suspended in egg yolk. Perhaps pastel is the only other medium that allows viewers to fully experience the tactile qualities of the minerals and colored earths that artists have traditionally used. Unlike linseed oil used in paint, egg yolk does not leave a shiny yellow film on top of the pigment.

Anyone who has tried to remove dried egg yolk knows that it gets harder each day. “If you wait longer, it is harder to remove, but it comes off differently,” McDonnell said. “That’s what I love about it; I am constantly surprised. I’ll be working with this for the rest of my life. I will never find all the possibilities in it.”

When rinsing and sanding layers of tempera, McDonnell said, she works in silence, and these abstract grounds hold an importance equal to the blossoms and creatures painted on top. The background for *Down the Garden Path* sat in the studio for years before McDonnell knew how to finish it. “I fell in love with it as an abstract piece, and it took me four years to find what would go on it,” she said. “I knew that it needed to be in perfect balance with the background, not competing with it.”

To paint the illusionistic aspects in her work, McDonnell said she often starts by photographing her subjects. “I usually get the basic information

down and then put the photograph away. I paint the realistic element with the background in mind. I try to get them to live together.”

While painting the delicately curved petals of a peony, the iridescent blue-green of a beetle’s wing, or the silky sheen on a lizard’s back, McDonnell often listens to Books on Tape. “When I’m doing some of the areas that are rendered, I know what they are going to look like, so I don’t have to concentrate so hard.” She added that she would find it too distracting to paint to music.

McDonnell shuns painterly tricks; her flowers, bugs, and birds are executed with direct simplicity and care as she records the leathery texture of thick leaves and the softness of the folds of skin around a turtle’s eye. McDonnell’s renderings of an egg, orchids, and grasses seem more real than reality as they emerge from abstract backgrounds. Occasionally she paints flowers as stylized as pinwheels or leaves that look like the flat silhouettes common in Japanese textile designs.

In some paintings scrubbed and sanded layers of egg and pigment become sky or water. “I call them ‘still lives’ because they are caught in a moment, like a tableau. All the actors are stilled,” McDonnell said. “In *Desert Still Life* the perspective is completely wrong. It is centered around a yucca that is in my yard. I wanted to put it into a somewhat natural habitat.”

McDonnell follows no set formula. In *Meadow* she painted a blue sky over most of the abstract background. But that didn’t work, so now the sky is green, and the only place where the original orange ground is visible is in the flat, six-petal blossoms that seem to pop in the lower half of the painting. “My paintings are like collages — *Meadow* especially,” she noted. “I decided who was going to stay and who wasn’t. They became cutouts.”

The largest of McDonnell’s paintings are about 3 by 4 feet; most are much smaller. Yet they have a physical presence that is lost in reproduction. The copper blue she used for the background of *Desert Still Life* is mixed with a bit of crystal, and the ground of *First Bloom* is composed mostly of cinnabar, which changes with the light.

“When you see something in miniature, it forces you to completely change your perspective in order to enter into it, and I do want people to enter my paintings,” McDonnell said. “It’s a childlike sensation, like looking into one of those little Easter eggs; you block everything else out.” ◀

details

- ▼ Susan McDonnell — *Still Lives: New Work*
- ▼ Opening reception 5-7 p.m. Friday, April 6; exhibit through April 29
- ▼ Klaudia Marr Gallery, 668 Canyon Road, 988-2100



Natural History, 2007, egg tempera on panel, 12 x 9 inches

*I call them ‘still lives’
because they are caught
in a moment, like a
tableau. All the
actors are stilled.*

— artist Susan McDonnell



Around the Pond, 2007, egg tempera on panel, 20 x 30 inches