

Sullivan Goss: An American Gallery

## Susan McDonnell: Curiouser & Curiouser!

**“Curiouser and curiouser!” cried Alice after falling down the rabbit hole.**

By Kerry Methner, PhD / CASA

**I F RABBIT HOLES CAN BE MAGICAL**, artist Susan McDonnell has become a talented magician: diving in, breaking open eggs to temper pigments for her exquisite egg tempera paintings. Some eleven of her earthy panels have found their way to Santa Barbara and will be on view through August 31st at Sullivan Goss: An American Gallery.



Susan McDonnell

“Years ago I read *Cat’s Eye* by Margaret Atwood and the main character paints in egg tempera,” the artist related. “Having never done it, I was curious and an artist friend lent me his set of powdered pigments. After the first little painting I was hooked.”

“Egg tempera paint,” she continued, “is simply egg yolk, distilled water, and dry pigment... I like the tradition and ritual of breaking the yolk and tempering the pigments.”

That ritual also extends to the artist’s gaze as she takes in the natural world which is the focus of her work.

“I think what I am doing as I paint is simply creating objects of contemplative observation,” McDonnell explained. “I view the world as having mysteries and magic, particularly in the way all things connect and flow. My subject is nature and I feel my role is to shine

a light on the mysteries I see or sense there... but not too bright a light or they disappear... The mysteries are important because they speak to a part of ourselves that is connected to nature. The mysteries remind us to respect and care for it.”

In the resulting paintings, from mysterious landscapes to the almost microscopic details of butterfly wings, McDonnell evokes a powerful visual narrative. “I get the same sensation of vastness when looking closely at a dragonfly as I do when looking miles across a landscape. The vastness is in the exquisite details and patterns of its wings and funny turn of its head when you get close. I can get ‘lost’ in both equally,” the artist related.

While McDonnell’s unique sense of the micro and the macro somehow feels like a fit with her reverence for the natural world, it also imbues her work with a certain “feel” that is unusual and dramatic. Susan Bush, Curator of



Monarch and Etrog, 2014, Egg tempera by Susan McDonnell

Contemporary Art at Sullivan Goss, wrote of the drama this way, “Her paintings all seem to have an edge – both a theatricality and a reverence for oddity... She also seems to imbue the decorative quality of her work with a sense of irony or defiance. By painting the rare and the bizarre in a traditionally decorative form and style, she subtly subverts the tradition.”

“I think it great fun to come upon the unexpected,” the artist explained. “For me it is often the patterns, colors, and astonishing detail in nature. I try to bring that same quality to my paintings.”

McDonnell teaches at Mount Saint Mary’s College in Los Angeles. She received both her BFA and her Masters of Fine Arts from the Art Center College of Design in Pasadena and has shown extensively in Los Angeles and Santa Fe. This is her first solo exhibition in Santa Barbara.

“I have had so many mentors and people I look up to, from artists that lived 500 years ago to my closest relatives and friends,” McDonnell shared. “They are all essential in the work I do as an artist... My main work as a teacher is to open my student’s minds and eyes to the endless possibilities in art and to give them the tools to find their own voice and bring it forth.”

That sense of connection has found a unique expression in McDonnell’s egg tempera medium. It works as she creates layer after layer of paint. McDonnell writes, “I look at that process as creating a history. Each layer being affected and affecting the one that came



Loma Vista, 2014, 18x14" | Egg tempera/panel by Susan McDonnell

before. Sometimes this process would go on for months and even years. Then the removal of layers is a surprise of unexpected textures and relationships. Looking back on personal history often does the same thing for me.”

McDonnell first engaged her desire to be an artist with a crayon in hand. “When I was about five or six, coloring in a coloring book with a babysitter, her picture was so good, even and neat with bold colors,” she recalled. “I strived to color as well as her. Drawing and painting have been my favorite subjects ever since.”

Sullivan Goss is located at 7 E. Anapamu St. and is open daily 10 to 5:30pm. For info reach them at 730-1460 or visit [www.sullivangoss.com](http://www.sullivangoss.com).