

Biologist captures critters with use of colored pencils

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COUNCIL ON CULTURE & ARTS



Hester

The only guests to appear in artist Sharon Hester's dining room are a smidge on the wild side. The table is set with rows of colored and graphite pencils and sheets of paper — a makeshift studio space where flora and fauna are sketched into being and bloom.

Some of Hester's drawings will be showcased as part of COCA's annual Creative Tallahassee exhibit in the City Hall Art Gallery, opening with a reception on Saturday.

Hester grew up in Riverview, Florida, where her family lived in a wooded area on the outskirts of town. She always enjoyed drawing and distinctly recalls her 7-year-old self using a box of crayons to reimagine a squirrel on a tree. She was frustrated that there wasn't a particular shade of brown in her waxy arsenal, her eye craving a certain level of meticulousness even at an early age.

During the day, Hester is an employee for the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, working on the Big Bend Wildlife Management Area, which runs along the coast of Taylor and Dixie counties. Her duties include maintaining the habitat for wildlife while concurrently managing the recreational features of the land. Hester smiles and muses that because there is no day to day routine, she's constantly on a new adventure.

"As a biologist having spent so much time outdoors, I don't just see things as an artist," explains Hester. "Artists see art, but I also have a knowledge of ecosystems and species that most people have never heard of, and I think those experiences inform my art."

Though she fostered her artistic talents and love of drawing throughout high school, Hester decided to pursue a degree in biology from Lake Erie College and a master's in wildlife biology from Ohio State University. Five years ago, Hester was engaged in a job that required her to do a good deal of writing while working from home.

Hester would wake up early each morning to write while she was at her best, but soon came to the realization that her daily routine was missing art. After taking the time to research various artistic mediums, she eventually swapped her laptop for a set of colored pencils and now dedicates at least an hour each morning to creating with colored pencils. She finds that the medium lends itself well to her stop-and-go process.

"I can pick up where I left off and put it down when it's time to get ready for work," explains Hester. "I don't have to clean up pencils, throw away paint, or wash up before I quit, so it works for me. It's the most satisfying thing that I can manufacture and have control of and do every day."

Now reconnected with art, Hester joined the Colored Pencil Society of America chapter of central Florida, and attends meetings whenever possible. Critiques and feedback are an invaluable part of the gatherings and retreats that Hester participates in, and she especially finds assistance with composition while she's in the prelimi-



SHARON HESTER

Oh Shenandoah sketch by Sharon Hester.



SHARON HESTER

"Independence Day," captures Sharon Hester's niece, pink-faced and glowing at sundown at the beach on the Fourth of July.



nary stages of starting a piece to be vital to her work.

Her process truly begins with an array of photographs that she uses as a reference for her landscape and portrait pieces, which she describes as being stylistically rooted in realism, though she is interested in playing with more abstract realism in the future. Not striving to recreate a photograph, a challenge of the medium, she will often ruminate on how to combine or tweak images to allow the drawing to stand on its own. In terms of drawing, blending is her favorite part of the process, and friends and artists often ask her how she achieves her soft edges.

"The strength of color pencils is that they are soft and translucent," says Hester. "Depending on how toppy your paper is you can have ten or twelve layers of colored pencil if you stay light and don't burnish the paper and make a real depth of color. You're blending on your paper and can produce colors that don't exist in your palette, which to me is fun."

Hester admits that the process of creating these unique "paintings" is a slow one, especially as she works in her off hours, with some pieces taking anywhere from a month to half a year to complete. Her favorite drawings are always the most recent ones. Currently, a drawing of a black skimmer is perched on her piano where she contemplates the energy she hoped to convey with water spraying behind him as his long bill scoops up a little school of fish.

Light, in particular, tends to capture Hester's creativity like in her drawing, "Oh Shenandoah," where afternoon lights shine through the ears of two nuzzling fawns. "Hickory Nut Falls" came about after a challenge from her drawing group to use a mineral as inspiration. She chose from her photographs of Chimney Rock State Park in North Carolina, inspired by contrasting sharp shadows and the colorful, wet, rocks of a waterfall. Another, "Independence Day," captures her niece, pink-faced and glowing at sundown at the beach on the Fourth of July.

Hester is excited to showcase the latter two drawings in the City Hall gallery. She hopes her

If you go

What: Creative Tallahassee 2017
When: Opening Reception, 6-7:30 p.m., March 24. Exhibition runs through May 15, Monday-Friday from 8 a.m.-5 p.m.
Where: City Hall Galleries, 300 South Adams St.
Cost: Free
Contact: For more information, call 850-224-2500 or visit <http://coca.tallahasseearts.org/art-in-public-places/city-hall-gallery>.

view of the environment comes across in her work and quotes a poetic verse from Elizabeth Barrett Browning.

"The 'Earth's crammed with heaven,' but you have to be able to see it otherwise it passes you by," says Hester. "Because of the way that I see wild places and wildlife, I see things that most people don't get to see because either they don't have the opportunity or their eyes aren't open to see it. To miss that or never know about it, or to let things disappear, would be a tragedy, so I try to portray in my art the beauty of the landscape and the creatures that live here."

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