

BEYOND PORTRAITS

The wildlife paintings of **Lisa Gleim** suggest storylines inspired by fables and lore.



BY GUSSIE FAUNTLEROY



▲ **Only in America, pastel on Yellowstone maps, 36 x 48.**
◀ **In the Bearsuit of Happiness, pastel, 30 x 19.**

JUST WHEN ARTIST Lisa Gleim (pronounced Glime) was feeling the need for an infusion of creative energy after 10 years of doing commissioned portraiture, along came a request to paint a golden retriever. The client wanted her to work from a photo of the dog swimming. Until that point, most of Gleim's portraits of children or pets focused on the subject with minimal background. This time she found herself joyfully immersed in the challenge of painting both the animal and the water, conveying a sense of movement and the sparkling play of light. The process stirred up cherished memories from her lifelong love of both animals and water. It led to an epiphany: She could combine the two things that mean the most to her. It also opened the door to portraying animals other than pets.

Today, Gleim's award-winning pastel paintings frequently feature wildlife of the Rocky Mountain West; she enjoys several weeks each year in Montana with her husband and daughter. She also paints birds and seascapes inspired by the South Carolina coast where she spent time with her grandparents as a child. In between, the artist's home and studio sit on a wooded lot at the northwestern edge of Atlanta and across the city from where she grew up.

Gleim describes her childhood self as a "creative nerd," always more interested in staying inside doing something crafty than playing outdoors. Both sides of her family included artists and creative people—an aunt carved ostrich eggs and made porcelain dolls, her grandmother was good at drawing and photography, and a great-great-uncle was a Ringling Brothers circus clown and accomplished painter. Gleim's father "could make or build anything" and was good at wood-working, as was his own father. "Being creative was natural to us. My hands always had to be doing something creative," she says. That included sewing and quilting, but especially drawing.

When Gleim was about 5 years old, her parents followed a longtime Southern tradition and engaged an artist to paint portraits of Gleim and her younger sister. Portraits of family members and ancestors were on the walls of all her relatives' homes and were her first experience of original art. For her own portrait, Gleim remembers sitting still and watching *Sesame Street* on a small TV while the artist worked. Later, when the paintings were brought home, she was in awe of how a likeness could be created with paint.

While she didn't try using paints herself until much later, Gleim received en-



contact information

www.lisagleimfineart.com

representation

Beverly McNeil Gallery, Birmingham, AL, www.beverlymcneilgallery.com
Portraits Inc., Birmingham, AL, and Flat Rock, NC, www.portraitsinc.com
Paderewski Fine Art, Beaver Creek, CO, and Nashville, TN, www.sportsmangallery.com
Atlanta Artist Collective, Atlanta, GA, www.atlanta.artistcollectives.org
Montana Trails Gallery, Bozeman, MT, www.montanatrails.com
McLarry Fine Art, Santa Fe, NM, www.mclarryfineart.com;
Portrait Associates, Raleigh, NC, www.portraitassociates.com;
Cheryl Newby Gallery, Pawley's Island, SC, www.cherylnewbygallery.com

upcoming shows

Pushing Forward Reaching Back, 2023 American Women Artist exhibition, Brookgreen Gardens, Murrells Inlet, SC, May 13-July 23.

The Russell, C.M. Russell Museum, Great Falls, MT, August 17-19.

Western Visions, National Museum of Wildlife Art, Jackson, WY, September 14-October 1.

couragement from elementary and high school art teachers who praised her skill and asked to keep some of her drawings. Following high school, she enrolled in the Atlanta College of Art. However, the school's focus on design didn't meet her desire to learn classical realism, so she left after a short time. She worked for two years in the Art of Animation Gallery at Walt Disney World in Florida, where she hung out with animators and other artists and took part in sketch groups.

Then, a cousin recommended the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in Philadelphia. On her first day, Gleim found herself in a figure painting class and had to admit to the instructor that she had never used oil paints. With a little guidance she dove in, but never felt a strong pull to oils. She loved figure drawing and cast drawing, which was her original technique of choice. During her second year, she was introduced to a variety of mediums including pastel. The instructor was a watercolor

artist, however, so the class spent minimal time with pastels.

Her real involvement with pastels began after graduation when a former classmate, who was interested in other mediums, gave Gleim a leftover set of colors she'd bought for a course. Gleim started playing with them. "I used the wrong paper at first, but I enjoyed it and became addicted," she says, noting that addicted is an appropriate term. Since pastel colors cannot be mixed, the artist





▲ **You Don't Say**, pastel, 23 x 27.

◀ **All Wet**, pastel on Montana map, 20 x 22.

continually accumulates individual pastels in subtle variations of color. Today she has thousands.

For two months out of the two years following graduation, Gleim studied portraiture with a Maryland-based artist couple, Cedric and Joannette Egeli. She was especially fascinated with Joannette's pastel portraits of children. Gleim soon began taking her own commissions for portraits of children, later adding portraits of pets. After eight years in Philadelphia, Gleim and her husband settled back in her home city, where her studio today is a good-

sized space above the garage, with bright natural light from windows on four sides of a large cupola-like opening overhead.

After her experience portraying the swimming golden retriever, Gleim began painting other animals. In 2016 the family bought a vacation home in Big Sky, Montana, and the world of Western wildlife opened to her. The Grizzly & Wolf Discovery Center in West Yellowstone became a favorite destination. A sanctuary for animals that cannot return to the wild, it offers excellent photography opportunities.

For a time, Gleim produced straightforward wildlife imagery against backgrounds of their natural habitats, which she still does for some creatures, including shorebirds in coastal scenes. But her creative appetite wanted more. She shares, "I'm a bit of a packrat—museum tickets, subway tickets, road maps. I looked at a box of maps I'd kept and thought, 'That's paper I can paint on!'" She depicted a grizzly, using as her painting surface a map of territory where the bear lives. It launched an exciting direction she continues to explore.





▲ Moonlight Serenade, pastel, 30 x 19.

◀ The Secret Keepers, pastel, 40 x 30.



One Must Be a Fox to Recognize a Trap, pastel on geographical maps, 21 x 31.



Jack and Jenny, pastel on geographic survey maps, 25 x 37.

Ideas for paintings not only come from photographs Gleim takes, but from ones she has permission to use from friends and other photographers. She also finds inspiration in the lore from various Native American communities, Aesop's Fables and fairy tales. THE SECRET KEEPERS began with a photo of a grizzly sitting on a rock, its head turned toward the viewer in a contemplative pose. Around the bear are three ravens perched on the rock and a nearby bare limb.

Reading about the meaning of "spirit animals" in certain Indigenous traditions, Gleim learned that the raven is a "keeper of secrets of the universe and the bear is all-knowing. The ravens are around the bear because he is the universe and he is telling them its secrets," she says. The painting earned a Purchase Award at the

2020 American Women Artists exhibition at the Booth Western Art Museum in Cartersville, Georgia.

Animals have been central in Gleim's life since childhood. Gleim and her sister kept rabbits, lizards, frogs, hamsters, dogs, ferrets, mice, a white rat and a sweet (descended) skunk named Blossom. "I've had compassion for animals since I was a toddler," she says. As an adult she is a passionate conservationist and a member of the Society of Animal Artists, as well as other international and national art societies. She currently serves as vice president of American Woman Artists.

A wild animal that especially lends itself to the kinds of "curious poses" Gleim likes is the fox. Her painting ONE MUST BE A FOX TO RECOGNIZE A TRAP was

inspired by a photo of a fox bending down with its thick tail and long body in a graceful curve that echoes the weathered piece of wood on which it sits. She wondered what the fox could be looking at or hearing. The answer was a raven. As one raven flies in, another, perched on the wood, faces the fox and teases him, holding out a pearl with its black beak. The artist affixed an actual plastic pearl to the piece, which is painted on a collage of geographic maps.

"These are not just portraits," she says of her wildlife art. "I enjoy coming up with the storyline behind it. It's a nice challenge, making me think outside the box and do a little research, which is also fun." ❖

Colorado-based Gussie Fauntleroy writes for a variety of art publications and is the author of three books on visual artists. Learn more at www.gussiefauntleroy.com.