

Norman artist inspired by nature

By Doug Hill

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Norman artist Deborah Kaspari has been drawing and painting wildlife since she was a toddler.
Doug Hill / For The Transcript

Deborah Kaspari's mother, Frances Cotter, didn't put coloring books into her toddler daughter's little hands. She thought Deborah should learn to draw by looking at the world and transferring what she saw onto paper with a pencil. Cotter is an artist herself and Deborah watched her mom draw, make woodcut prints and oil paintings. Deborah learned to draw, and one of her favorite subjects then and now are the winged beasts found everywhere in the world.

"I have drawings of birds from when I was 2 or 3 years old," Kaspari said. "They just captivated me, and I don't know why. As I got a little older, I took up birding."

At age 10, she ventured into the outdoors with binoculars and a Peterson Field Guide to Birds. By her 20s, Kaspari was a die-hard birder. She grew up in the Bay Area and graduated from the California College of the Arts.

Kaspari didn't come to Norman until 1995 and never met celebrated University of Oklahoma ornithologist and bird artist George M. Sutton (1998-1982) but she'd read his field accounts while still a child. There are obvious similarities between Sutton and Kaspari in their love for birds and passion for depicting them in art.

Kaspari's art has been recognized for its virtuosity with dozens of honors, awards, residencies, solo and group exhibitions, teaching appointments, lectures and demonstrations. Her solo exhibition "Perched on a Page" at the Museum of American Bird Art in Canton, Massachusetts, concluded this month. Kaspari's illustrations have appeared in scholarly wildlife books including "Thoreau's Animals" and "Coyote at the Kitchen Door."

She has produced numerous articles and cover illustrations for Birdwatcher's Digest and Oklahoma Today magazines. Kaspari works in a downtown Norman studio. A pastel-tinted landscape in progress inspired by a 2016 Artists for Nature Foundation trip to Israel and Jordan was on her easel.

"I've been doing a lot of pastels the last five years," Kaspari said. "I used to do a lot of graphite drawings filled in with pastels but with very little color."

She spent eight months in a New England forest on Harvard University's Bullard Fellowship as their first artist in residence exploring land use histories and ecological legacies with pencil and sketchbook in hands.

"I would take my equipment out and do these fairly good-sized pencil drawings of stone ruins in the woods," she said. "There are Revolutionary War and Colonial-era structures such as malt mills and tanneries with the forest growing up through them. It was once farmland and now is the Harvard Forest near Petersham that's an ecological preserve."

Her pictures convey a solemn and mysterious majesty of once robust human civilization being slowly but surely reclaimed by nature. Kaspari is also enthusiastic about the artistic inspiration she finds in the wilds of Oklahoma.

"Susan Dragoo and I worked together for about a year following the Kiamichi and Canadian rivers for Oklahoma Today," Kaspari said. "She did the writing and I did the artwork. We had tremendous adventures all over Oklahoma from one end of the state to the other."

"We were trying to get a handle on how important these rivers are, yet different from each other in terms of flora and fauna."

At one point, Kaspari painted the river from the vantage point of their off-road vehicle's roof. She saw a horned lizard for the first time, and it held still long enough for her to capture the little rascal's likeness on paper.

Kaspari has drawn nature from Denmark to Oregon. She works in the plein air style and also from photos taken on location, often in dramatically remote locations — sometimes on treks with OU biology professor spouse Mike Kaspari.

"We went to the Amazon in 2009 on a science expedition, staying at a field station that was semi-primitive," she said. "But it had this fantastic tree canopy walkway and platform 150 feet up connected by rope walks. I spent so much time up in the treetops with these incredibly brightly colored birds, butterflies and monkeys. I was in the moment and sketching everything around me."

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