

THE TAXONOMY OF PEGGY MACNAMARA



DEPS ARTIST PROFILE SERIES

March 9-April 28, 2023

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The Taxonomy of Peggy Macnamara features an immense array of artwork that has been created during Macnamara's tenure as the only artist in residence at the Field Museum. This exhibition focuses on her relationship to observing and working among the collections over decades where practice as an artist, teacher, and collaborator has developed a process of long looking that has created a taxonomy of its own.

Macnamara has traveled across the world, geared with her pencils and watercolors, investigating the fascinating intricacies of nature alongside scientists and peers from the Field Museum. Although her work uses the academic approach of illustrating, her savvy is evident in her loose handling of her art materials to document plants, animals, and related conservation work. Macnamara's work artfully captures living things (or in some cases—once living), educates us, and sparks interest in the complexities of the natural world.

This exhibition hones in on a tapestry of works that inspire curiosity and deep looking at plants, animals, and the dynamic relationships between them. Macnamara's attention to detail, and skilled hand at analytically dissecting plants and animals is revealed through the works that leave the stages of the development of a piece visible. We engage with her work for the love of looking, but inevitably discussions about nature, extinction, conservation, and collections permeate its surface.

PEGGY MACNAMARA

This adventure began thirty-five years ago, when **Peggy Macnamara** went to the Field Museum in Chicago to draw the Hoffmann Sculptures in order to improve her drawing skills. She found endless subject matter, a community, and a purpose for her work. Macnamara moved from Oriental artifacts, to birds, mammals, reptiles, and insects, drawing daily from the exhibit areas. She wandered through hidden areas of the museum painting oddities like tiny Tibetan statuary and the South American Shrunken heads. She eventually moved behind the scenes into the collection areas where she created books published by University of Chicago Press including *Illinois Insects and Spiders*, *Architecture by Birds and Insects*, *The Art of Migration*, *The Peregrine Returns*, and *From the Seashore to the Seafloor*. This adventure carried Macnamara outside the museum to collaborate with scientists in Madagascar, Africa, Central and South America, Alaska and other places enabling her to use her work to contribute to Museum Conservation efforts.

Peggy Macnamara started going to the Field Museum in the 1980's. She went each morning to draw for 3-4 hours. Back then there was free parking just north of the front of the museum. She began in the China exhibits on the second-floor mezzanine. She eventually moved into the Birds-Mammals exhibits. By carefully observing nature, she not only became a strong draughtsman, but she also developed a color sense as well as compositional instincts. Behind the Scenes is a particular and unique series, it is the result of slow observation—and it reflects the fact that persistent work can unearth a buried concept, teach composition, color theory, patience and self-forgiveness for each, and every setback. The Field Museum itself is an inspiration, presenting easy access to science and nature, which are central to artistic expression. During her tenure at the Field Museum Macnamara has had numerous solo and group exhibitions and has authored many books including *Illinois Insects and Spiders*, *Architecture by Birds and Insects*, *The Art of Migration*, *The Peregrine Returns*, and *From the Seashore to the Seafloor* published by the University of Chicago Press.

Website: peggyamacnamara.com

Instagram: [@peggyamacnamarawatercolors](https://www.instagram.com/peggyamacnamarawatercolors)



Flock Left, 2011, watercolor, 30" x 41"



Arapaima, 2017, watercolor, 18" x 56"



Coelacanth, 2012, watercolor, 18" x 48"



Caddisfly Nest, 2007, watercolor, 41" x 18"



Costa Rica, 2015, watercolor, 31" x 51"



Spoonbills Mating, 2022, watercolor, 30" x 40"



Bird Prep Lab, 2012, watercolor, 22" x 30"



Frogs in a Jar, 2012, Watercolor, 22" x 30"

INTERVIEW WITH PEGGY MACNAMARA

Conducted by Sierra Delamarter

Sierra Delamarter: You state that “[your] work is the study of nature.” What inspired you to make nature your mission as an artist? Has nature always been your focus?

Peggy Macnamara: I went to graduate school for Art History. I thought that if I studied what went before, I could find my direction. The work I most admired was 15th century drawings. I loved Leonardo’s study pages. In the late 14th century artist began to lay out their ideas on paper. Leonardo’s study pages contained various views and text. I latched onto this idea of a page of ideas rather than a finished composition. I knew that good drawing skills were essential, so I set up still lives in my studio and went to figure drawing workshops 2–3 times a week. The “artifacts” in my studio had no history or interest for me—that’s why the Field Museum’s China exhibit was such a good fit. Not only were the Chinese treasures beautifully made but they were arranged in cases and the architecture of the museum filled the negative space! the composition was arranged for me—and what I was drawing was beautiful. At the time I was using colored pencil because I had control. I had never had a watercolor or painting class. Colored pencil consisted of slow layering of color; this eventually became my method with watercolor. Also, these 30” x 40” drawings took 2–3 months; this taught me patience.

SD: You have been in residency at the Field Museum since the early 90s. How has being surrounded by scientists and preservationists influenced and informed your practice? How has your work changed and progressed since then?

PM: I was worked in the museum galleries for about ten years before I was introduced to the scientists in the bird department. I loved the notion that art could do something for science. It could expose and engage the world

with science’s secrets! The contemporary art that was out and about was self-contained. It did not inspire me. The artist’s life is already self-centered, so the opportunity to actually “contribute” intrigued me. I couldn’t do what the scientists were doing but I could spread the word to broader audience. I was asked to go to Madagascar by Steve Goodman, a museum scientist who studied mammals. This was my first chance to step out of the museum environment and record work done on site. Dr. Debra Moskovits, who began Keller Science Action Center the conservation part of the Field Museum, asked me to paint some new plant species from Peru.

I was happy to contribute. I had published a book on drawing/painting at the Field Museum but had not worked for any scientists. My first project for the University of Chicago Press was the *Illinois Insects and Spiders* book. Jim Louderman suggested what could be on each page and inspired me to broadcast the wonders of our insects. While working on this book I opened some cases in the Insect department to find a large collection of insect nests. I was astonished at their complexity. This is what inspired *Architecture by Birds and Insects: A Natural Art* book. Dave Willard’s 40 years of work on Migrating birds, cooperating with the collection monitors, and recording each bird found in the Chicago area are what inspired *The Art of Migration: Birds, Insects, and the Changing Seasons in Chicagoland* book. Scientists like Mary Hennen (Peregrines) and Janet Voight (Marine life) allowed me to paint their accomplishments.

SD: When painting your subjects, what influences your artistic choices (composition, color, movement, etc.)? Do you have a preferred subject you like to paint or draw?

PM: I was inspired by the marine life material because the habitat was so unknown to

INTERVIEW CONTINUED

me. In the past, habitats were familiar but luminescence, steam under water, and creatures able to change their appearance to blend in with their environment was a new artistic experience. As to my

choices. I have drawn, painted, and studied perfectly made botanical subjects as well as all creatures available to me. I hope, or rather, assume after years of looking, that some of my subjects' design, construction, and color has slipped into my instincts, so I trust them.

The composition lessons in Bird flocks amazes me. While drawing large bird flocks, I realized their compositions adhered to the nineteenth century art critic John Ruskin's Nine laws of composition. I exhibited this work to point out that nature can educate as well as inspire most artists.

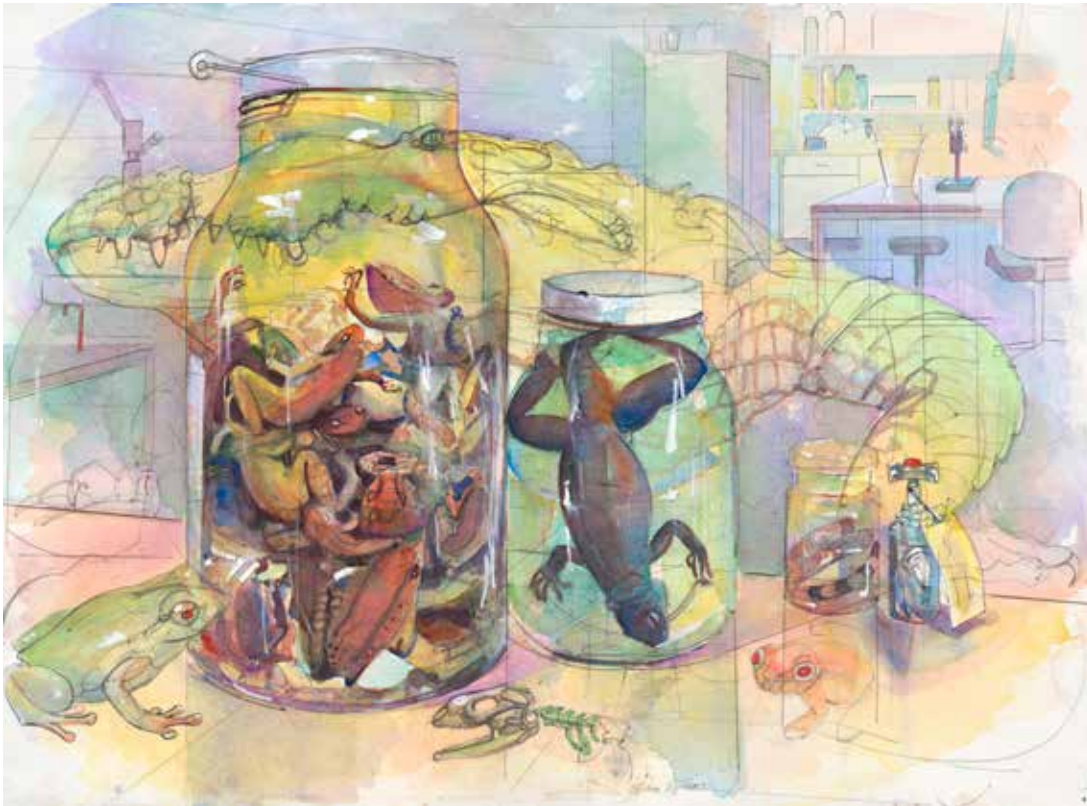
SD: How does watercolor aid in bringing life to the page in the subjects you paint?

PM: I've never taken a watercolor class. I went from the slow layering of colored pencils to watercolor. I use 300 lb. paper and I let most layers dry on their own. I feel completely free to do most anything a painter might do in oil or acrylic. I remove areas and repaint; I build darks by layering compliments. I am able to lighten dark areas with colors like Lemon Yellow. I don't feel any of the restrictions most people think are part of watercolor. I know fresh, wet surfaces have their allure, but watercolor can do this and more.

SD: How has your work aided in the fight for natural preservation? Is this something you have always planned to do with your work?

PM: I have been privileged to contribute in a small way to the preservation of our nature treasure by painting their praises and wonders. I have been honored when my work

has been used to point out nature's wonders. The Arapaima I painted was used to make t-shirts for all the scientists participating in a conference in Peru. The fish was a symbol of their years of work—and I was lucky enough to be able to contribute!



THE DEPS ARTIST PROFILE SERIES

The DEPS Artist Profile Series presented by Columbia College Chicago's Department of Exhibitions, Performance and Student Spaces (DEPS), is a virtual publication on select artists involved with the DEPS Galleries and the Columbia College Chicago community. Our goal with this series is to connect artist and viewer on a deeper level, and to highlight the amazing works and thoughts of our featured artists through interviews, artist biographies, and catalogs of work. Art has always been a way to connect with others, no matter where one may physically be. We hope by presenting the creativity and insights of the people involved in the DEPS Artist Profile Series that viewers may have one more way to stay in touch with and support the arts community. The DEPS Artist Profile Series is managed by DEPS Exhibitions Assistant Gallery Coordinator Sierra Delamarter. Graphic design is managed by DEPS Exhibitions Social Media Assistant Coordinator Rachel Manlubatan. This program is partially supported by a grant from the Illinois Arts Council Agency.

Learn more at: colum.edu/taxonomy

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Glass Curtain Gallery: 1104 S Wabash Ave, First Floor, Chicago, IL 60605

Gallery Hours: Monday–Wednesday, Friday–Saturday 9 a.m.–5 p.m.; Thursday 9 a.m.–7 p.m.