The Taxonomy of Peggy Macnamara



March 9–April 28, 2023

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Glass Curtain Gallery





A Taxonomy of Her Own

The Expansive Studio of Peggy Macnamara

My first trip to Peggy Macnamara's studio was in 2018, I was in the middle of curating *Citizen Animalia*, a group exhibition to be held in the Glass Curtain Gallery, opening in early March of 2020. *Citizen Animalia* was to feature artists who promote the value of the many living creatures we share this planet with and I thought Macnamara's work would be a perfect fit. I was thrilled to visit her studio located in the Field Museum, a world-renowned museum of natural history with a mission statement to "connect all of us to the natural world and the human story." I was familiar with her work from previous visits to the Field, as her watercolor paintings can be found in all corners of the institution incorporated into permanent displays and temporary exhibitions alike.

There is a passion in Macnamara's work that is tangible, a sense of experimentation and close observation. In her works, watercolor paint spills across the paper surface in a masterful way, taking advantage of the natural property of the material, allowing the pigment, water, and paper react organically. She renders her subjects with a relatable personality. Her gestures are subtle but significant, this is evident in *Painted Stork* where a slightly up turned smile curls at the base of the bird's bill. While a sense of joy and fascination is present in her body of work, there is also profound sadness woven throughout as Macnamara is painfully aware that scientists across the globe are scrambling to learn about the many creatures that inhabit our planet before they become extinct. They are also scrambling to amass data supporting why we should care for our natural environment, searching for a way to present their findings to politicians who can enforce conservation protections. Macnamara has helped greatly with this by collaborating with Field Museum scientists, her images of endangered plants and animals have been used in campaigns resulting in the creation of conservation programs and national parks across Central America and South America.

For my first studio visit, we met at north entrance of the Field Museum, adjacent to a natural prairie providing respite to migrating birds and butterflies. Macnamara outfitted me with a temporary badge and we traversed the cathedralesque lobby filled with enormous dinosaur skeletons, past hallways leading to a seemingly endless labyrinth of exhibits, and to the staff elevator which took us into the museum collections. It was an adventure. I was completely subsumed by the collections area, overwhelmed by archives of artifacts and immense catalogs of specimens and the many laboratories occupied by scientists studying insects, birds, and conservation. Macnamara took me to the bird prep lab, where we were warmly welcomed by the staff. Peggy's artwork was hung high on the walls above the tables lined with beautiful and bizarre specimens. We moved into another room where we watched several tanks full of flesh-eating Dermestid Beetles devouring animal carcasses, consuming

everything clean to the bone. I was both horrified and fascinated by the stark reality of how this process aids in the research of skeletal structures. Next, we went to her studio, a room sheathed in dark wood cabinets filled with interesting museum objects—rocks, skeletons, and preserved insect nests, which are all subjects of Macnamara's works. We looked through piles and piles of artwork and not more than five minutes would pass before a visitor appeared, one person after the other, each with eyes as wide as mine, surveying the huge number of artworks, fascinated by the scope of her work despite their regular drop-ins. It became clear to me that Macnamara's role as Field Museum Artist-in-Residence is highly valued. Peggy happily offered to loan several pieces for the *Citizen Animalia* exhibition.

When we finalized the list of works, she led me across the hallway to meet "Jim, the spider guy," or rather Jim Louderman, Collections Assistant of the Insect Division. Jim pulled out a book titled *Rosie the Tarantula*, illustrated by Macnamara and written by her daughter Katie Macnamara. The book recounts the adventures of Rosie, (a pink-toed tarantula—a living specimen of the arachnid collection that Jim works with) when she briefly escaped her laboratory enclosure. The book illustrates Rosie's adventures visiting the many display areas of the museum, wandering about as if on a vacation. The book gives Rosie a personality, we can almost relate to her, emphasizing that this little creature (that some find to be scary or gross) is curious and wants to have experiences much like we do. After we leafed through the book, Jim reached into an enclosure, and picked up the very Rosie we just read about and placed her on his head. The tarantula seemed quite comfortable up there and Jim turned the book to a page illustrating what was in front of me, Rosie resting on Jim's head. At the end of the studio visit, I shared with Peggy that I'm also a visual artist. She invited me to come back to the museum any time if I want to make drawings or paintings of any of the collection's objects. As that's how Macnamara got her start at the Field Museum more than thirty years ago— by coming into the galleries with an easel, paper, and painting supplies. She created artworks on-site from the endless collections of plant, animal, and mineral specimens on display. I left the museum filled with inspiration and admiration. I had just spent the afternoon with a highly accomplished artist, embedded in the culture of the Field Museum and I couldn't be more excited that she agreed to participate in my exhibit!

As planned, *Citizen Animalia* opened the first week of March 2020, featuring a big wall in the center of the gallery, full of Macnamara's large-scale paintings hung salon-style. They were arranged near works created by other artists who have similar investments in the preservation of animal life on our planet. Unfortunately, *Citizen Animalia* closed one week after opening, due to the global outbreak of Covid-19. The artists and I were equally frustrated, feeling like we had missed an opportunity.

The Taxonomy of Peggy Macnamara feels like a second chance—a better scenario that actually gives us (i.e., me and the rest of the DEPS team) the opportunity to present a more in-depth examination of Macnamara's huge body of work. During the planning phase, I was happy once again to make a few trips with my colleagues to Macnamara's studio. On one occasion we took an elevator that we shared with a few scientists, Peggy introduced us—pointing out their intriguing position titles: Snake Master and Bird Master. We were again greeted by Jim and Rosie and then made a brief visit with the beetles, who were still hurrying around doing their work of skeleton cleaning. For this studio visit, we had a lot more to accomplish, we had an entire gallery to fill. We decided to take every framed work in the studio, and we still wanted more. Macnamara led us to several other collection rooms, where there were lots of nooks and crannies occupied by preserved creatures and skeletons being assembled. I was overwhelmed by the smell of naphathalene, a preservative widely used across the laboratories. We wanted more insect artworks, so Macnamara took us down to the basement in a very tiny elevator that led us to the offices of the insect collection team, where she pointed out a large wall with several of her insect works. Much to the disappointment of the office staff, we took everything off their walls promising to bring it back. Through this tour, I again was hyperaware of how much Macnamara's contributions are valued across every corner of the Museum.

This exhibition is an in-depth exploration of Macnamara's work featuring 63 artworks, a small glimpse into the her long career as a professor of Scientific Illustration at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Field Museum Artist-in-Residence, and storied conservationist. The works on display simultaneously adhere to and defy traditional watercolor techniques. By embracing the unpredictable and organic nature of the watercolor paint, she both directs and observes what the paint wants to do, where it wants to go. Divided into several sections (which seamlessly blend together), the exhibit echoes the interconnectedness of the natural world.

Upon entering the gallery, the viewer encounters work in varying stages of doneness illuminating Macnamara's process as well as videos detailing her movements. The several documentary videos on display capture her in action while talking about her need to draw and re-draw her subjects until she "gets them right." She often answers her students quandaries about why she re-works her images so many times with "because I like to, I enjoy the process." Often Macnamara's works depict a subject from multiple perspectives, at times drawings intersect and might even be layered on top of each other. Rather than omitting graphite contour arcs, notes, and perspective lines, she intentionally leaves them, resulting in a rich multilayered effect that is as much about process as it is the final product. Also on display in the process section are *Law of Harmony, Law of Repetition, Flock Curve* #2 and *Flock Left*, all created for Macnamara's 2011 solo exhibition John Ruskin's Nine: Bird Compositions presented in Chicago's Packer Schopf Gallery. These works were created using Arlene Koziol's photographs of birds in flight as source material and were intended to illustrate basic principles of composition established by John Ruskin which were published in his book *Elements of Drawing* in 1857.

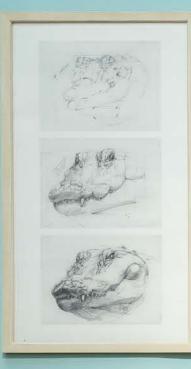
As the viewer moves through the gallery, the exhibit progresses into works that feature birds of many feathers. Some of the works focus on a single animal on a neutral white background, while others capture multiple birds thriving in their natural habitat. *Three Owls,* a dynamic work which features multiple views of the same animal is recognizable as one of the subjects created in the documentary videos. The highly detailed *Field Museum Prairie, North Entrance* depicts the museum's high architecture surrounded by a natural prairie occupied by colorful migrating birds and butterflies. The bird section progresses into works that document bird nests, rendered by Macnamara both outdoors in nature and in the Field Museum collections. The configuration of bird nests transitions into a collection of works depicting insect nests. These shelters are natural architecture inhabited by bagworms, ants, and caddisflies. Insects fill the remainder of the wall and are in turn displayed adjacent to a section of botanical renderings.

The then viewer passes into the one of the back rooms which is dedicated to works that have made a significant impact on conservation projects, many of them are tied to expeditions conducted by the Keller Science Action Center, a Field Museum program that conducts conservation projects in biologically rich areas of the world. In 2000, during a three-week expedition conducted by Action Center scientists in the remote mountains of Cordillera Azul of central Peru, more than 1,600 species of plants were discovered, many of them entirely new to science. Macnamara created several artworks capturing these newly discovered species including *Peru Plants #1* and *Peru Plants #2*. President Valentín Paniagua was so impressed by the beauty of Macnamara's paintings and the findings of the exploration team, that in 2001, he declared the 3.3 million acres of the studied area as a new national park called Parque Nacional Cordillera Azul. In addition, the exhibit's conservation section features works painted University of Chicago Press publications. *Peregrine Jewelers*, was created for Mary Hennen's *The Peregrine Returns, the Art and Architecture of an Urban Raptor Recovery* and Sea Otter was painted for *From the Seashore to the Seafloor*, written by Janet Voight.

The last section of the exhibit is a collection of works created in the Field Museum archives utilizing the same multi-perspective style and bright watercolor washes. A large work entitled *Eggs with Prep Lab* depicts egg and bird specimens, and in the upper right corner, a scientist can be seen working in the background which encapsulates the philosophy of Peggy's working process. Much like a Field Museum scientist, Peggy has a fervent passion for our natural environment and the creatures within it. Her process is always-observing, always-studying, ever-evolving and always "trying to get it right."

After visiting Peggy's studio several times while developing *Citizen Animalia* and *The Taxonomy of Peggy Macnamara* it's clear to me that her practice is not confined within the walls of the Artist-in-Residence studio at the Field Museum. Her work branches out into all areas of the museum, further beyond to the classroom, and even yet further into critically endangered areas of the world. Through promotional campaigns, publicized books, and exhibitions Macnamara's works have influenced students, scientists, artists, and political figures alike. Her far-reaching career has made a tangible impact on our natural world by asking us to be more observant, appreciative, and respectful of the living world around us. Chicago is lucky to be the home of this influential artist, I am grateful to have had the opportunity to work with her.

Mark Porter Co-curator





The Taxonomy of Peggy Macnamara March 9-April 28, 2023

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 her practice as an artist, teacher, and collaborator has developed a process of long looking that has created a taxonomy of its own.

Macanamara 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.

The gallery is laid out to present a speculative taxonomy. On this wall, Macnamara's material process is laid bare, exposing her structure for making, looking, and realizing her work. Birds, nests, insects, and botanicals inhabit the adjacent walls flowing into the adjoining gallery where a selection of works used to support conservation efforts is presented. In the very back room, images created in the collections of the Field Museum provide a glimpse of the jars, specimens, and artifacts that are housed behind the scenes and out of view from the general public.

As in nature, and in life, the taxonomy of this show is imperfect, and categories overlap. Ever present is Macanamara's hand. Her attention to detail and analytic ability to capture her subjects is exquisite while her mastery is revealed through works that leave their stages of artistic development visible. Engaging with her work is for the love of looking; inevitably discussions about nature, extinction, classification, conservation, and collections permeate the surface.

This project is partially supported by a grant from the Illinois Arts Council Agency.























































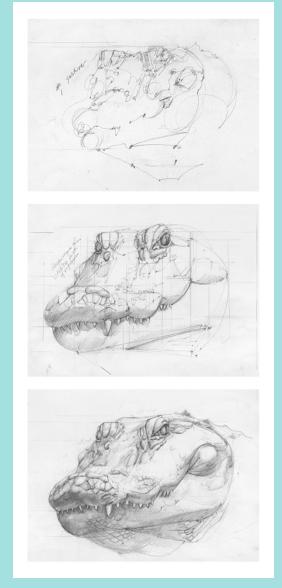








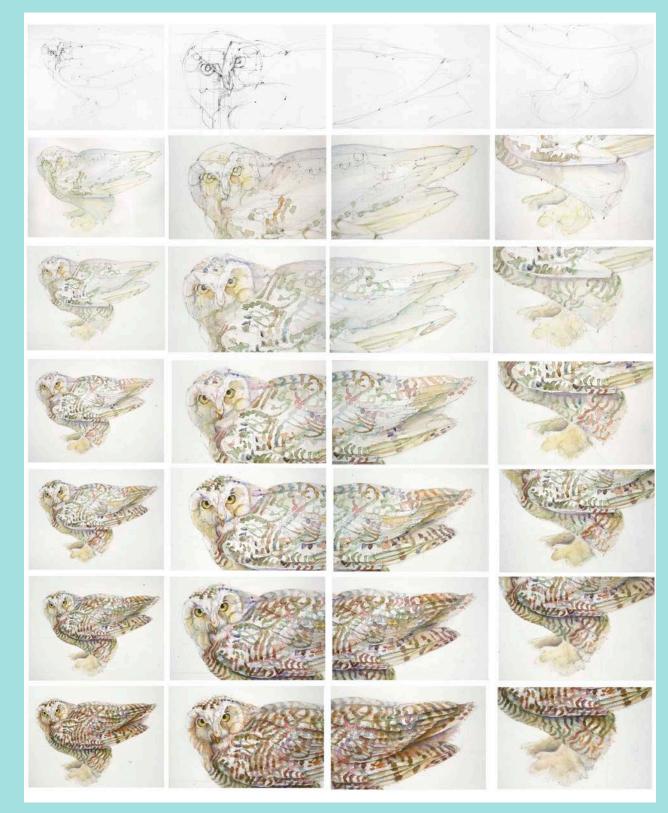
PROCESS WORKS



Alligator Drawing Progression, 2015, print



Two Owls Drawing Progression, 2015, print



Snowy Owl Progression, 2002, print



Law of Harmony, 2010, watercolor





Law of Repetition, 2011, watercolor



Flock Curve 2, 2010, watercolor

Flock Left, 2011, watercolor

BIRDS



Two Cranes Together, 2012, watercolor



Two Cranes Meet, 2012, watercolor



Starling, 2010, watercolor



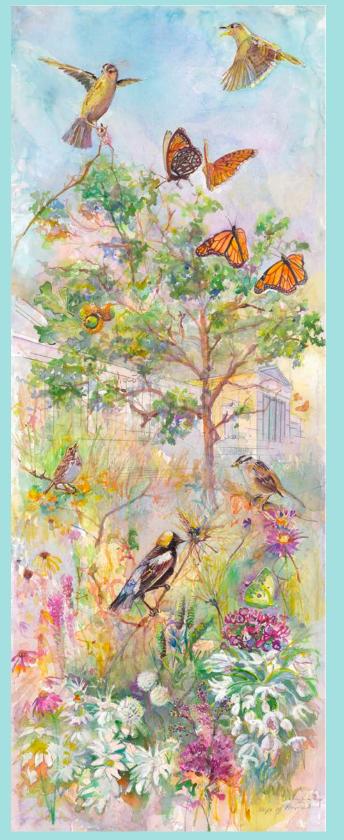
Painted Stork, 1996, watercolor





Spoonbills Mating, 2022, watercolor

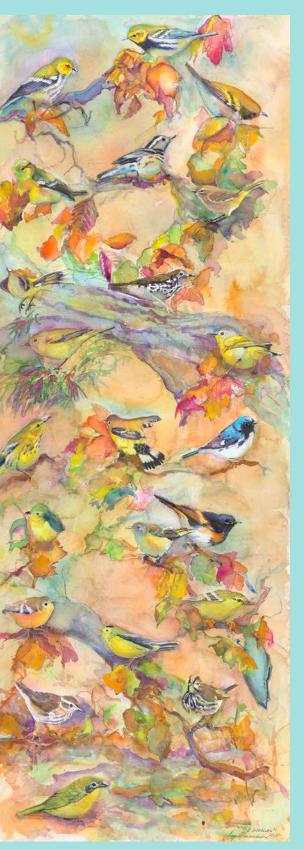
Three Owls, 2018, watercolor



Field Museum Prarie from the North Entrance, 2017, watercolor



Spring Warblers, 2020, print from original watercolor



Fall Warblers, 2020, watercolor



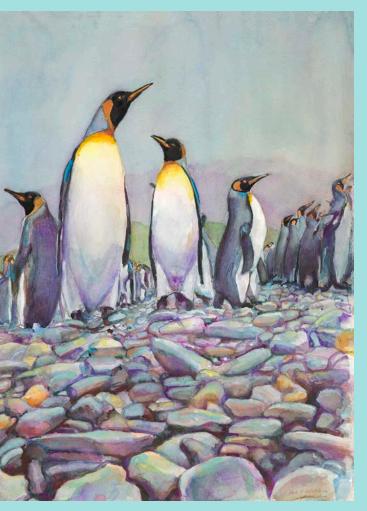
Bird Beaks, 2010, print



Birth of the Mallard Chicks, 2009, watercolor



Nesting Birds, 2010, watercolor



Penguins, 2022, watercolor

NESTS



Bird Nests, 2008, watercolor



Love Nest: Great Bowerbird, 2004, watercolor



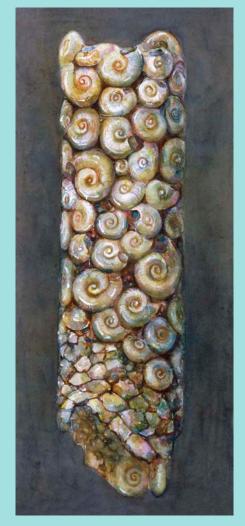
Bagworm Nest of Rods, 2007, watercolor



Oropendola and Insect Nest, 2008, watercolor



Nest Wrapped, 2007, watercolor



Caddisfly Nest of Shells, 2007, watercolor



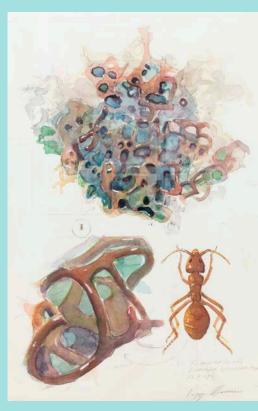


Ant Garden, 2004, watercolor

Carpenter Ant in Aspen Stumps, 2007, watercolor

INSECTS





Ant Lioetopum Apiculatum, 2007, watercolor

Ant Nest preserved, 2003, watercolor



Cover illustration for Architecture by Birds and Insects, 2007, watercolor





Field Museum Garden Bee Habitat 2, 2022, watercolor

Whip Scorpion, 2005, watercolor



Hanover Bugs 2, 2017, watercolor



Butterfly Eggs, 2021, watercolor



Metamorphosis, 2016, watercolor



Hanover Bugs 1, 2017, watercolor





Green Beetle: Scacher Calosama, 1998, watercolor

Bury Beetle, 1998, watercolor



Peanut Head, 1996, watercolor





Butterfly Case, 2005, watercolor

Black Witen with Katydid, 2007, watercolor

BOTANICALS



Magnolia Right, 2010, watercolor



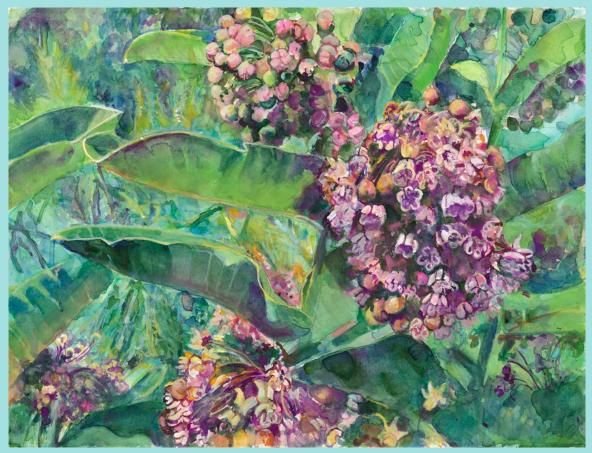
Magnolia Left, 2010, watercolor



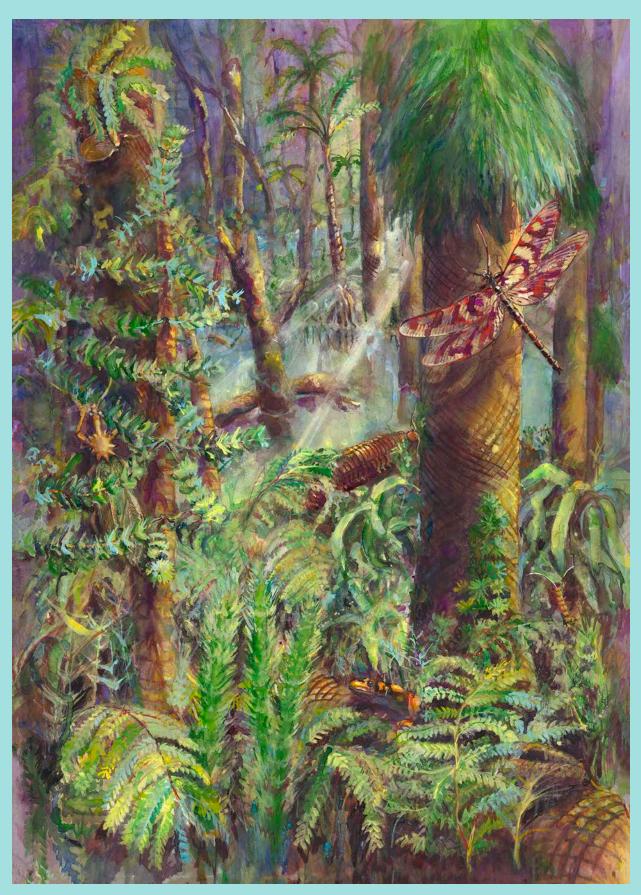
Hydrangea, 2009, watercolor



Milkweed 2, 2022, watercolor



Milkweed 3, 2022, watercolor



Coal Forest, 2018, watercolor



Costa Rica, 2015, watercolor





Peru Plants, 2, 2001, watercolor

Peru Plants, 1, 2001, watercolor

IN SUPPORT OF CONSERVATION



Bird Monitors, 2015, watercolor

Bird Monitors emphasizes the importance of collaboration in the pursuit of wildlife conservation. The Chicago Bird Collision Monitors, a group of volunteers dedicated to the protection of migratory birds, have been collecting and delivering expired birds to Field Museum scientist Dave Willard for many years. Willard, tags, preserves, and adds them into the Field Museum's bird collection to aid in learning more about bird populations, migration patterns, breeding behavior, physiology, bird health, and ultimately the health of the environment. Over 250 species of migratory birds (totaling 8 million annually) travel through Chicago however many of them die from fatal collisions with skyscraper windows. Thanks to the collaborative efforts of the Chicago Bird Collision Monitors, the Field Museum, the Chicago Audubon Society, the downtown Building Owners and Managers Association, and the City of Chicago, the Lights Out program was created. This program encourages buildings to shut off or dim their lights during bird migration to help ease bird strikes, with over 90% of Chicago's high-rise buildings participating, more migrating birds are able to pass through the



Bird Collections is a view behind the scenes at the Field Museum showing us a storage system utilized by museum scientists in the bird collections department. The collection is an internationally prized resource, and this image appears in Mary Hennen's book The Peregrine Returns, The Art and Architecture of an Urban Raptor Recovery. This book, illustrated by Macnamara, tells the story of the scientific research conducted with the Field's egg collection resulting in a national ban of the vicious pesticide DDT which was responsible for thinning Peregrine Falcon eggshells. Thanks to the banning and repopulation efforts, the falcons have been brought back from the brink of extinction.

Bird Collections, 2013, watercolor



Peregrine Jewelers, 2016, watercolor



Peregrine Falcon at St Michaels, 2016, watercolor

Peregrine Falcon at St. Michaels and Peregrine Jewelers were created for Mary Hennen's book The Peregrine Returns, The Art and Architecture of an Urban Raptor Recovery.



Sea Otter, 2020, watercolor

Sea Otter was created for the publication *From the Seashore to the Seafloor* which focuses on the amazing ecosystem beneath the waves. Sea otters, an endangered species, help maintain the delicate balance of the ocean's ecosystem by living amongst vast giant kelp forests. Atmospheric carbon dioxide, a prevalent greenhouse gas known to contribute to the increase of global temperatures is naturally absorbed and sequestered by Giant Kelp. Due to a decline of the sea otter population and their regular consumption of sea urchins, the giant kelp forests are being rapidly destroyed by an explosion in the sea urchin population.



Coelacanth, 2010, print from watercolor

Coelacanth is a depiction of a prehistoric fish once believed to have disappeared more than 60 million years ago. The oldest known fossils of the fish are 420 million years old, and it was believed to be extinct until its re-discovery in South Africa in 1938 by Marjorie Courtenay-Latimer, a curator whose job included visiting the docks to document fish coming from fishing boats. Today, the coelacanth is known to live in only two areas of the world, growing to an average length of 6', a maximum weight of 200 pounds and living as long as 60 years old at 2,300' below the surface of the ocean. This amazing discovery not only gave scientists an important piece of evolutionary history but serves as a reminder of how much research is still to be done in the earth's oceans.

Arapaima captures details of the largest freshwater fish in the world. Due to overfishing, the arapaima is a critically endangered species found in the Peruvian section of the Amazon River. Thanks to the efforts of indigenous communities of Peru and Field Museum scientist Alvaro del Campo, the Arapaima is making a slow yet steady recovery.

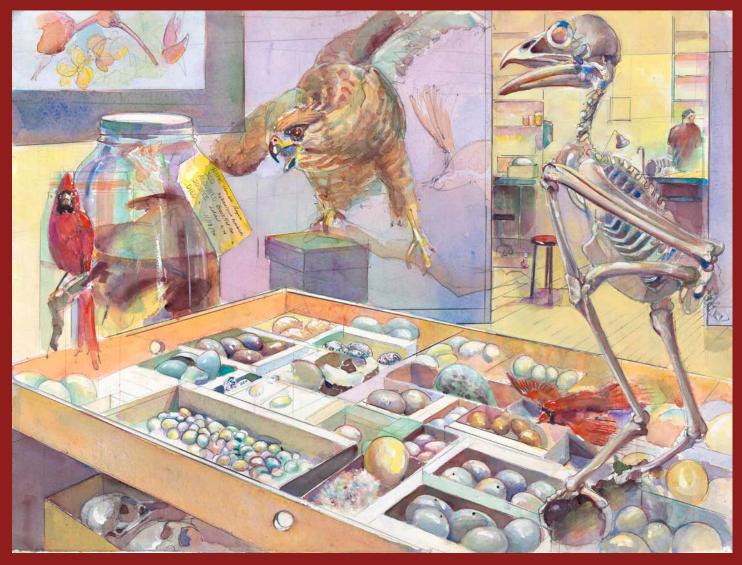


Arapaima, 2017, watercolor

BEHIND THE SCENES OF THE FIELD



Geology Case, 2013, watercolor

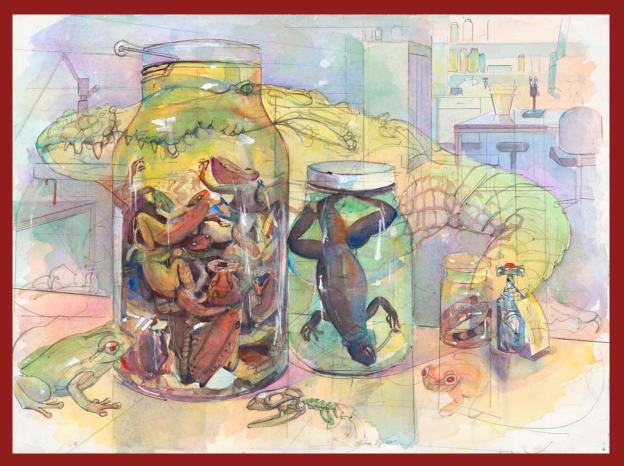


Plant Collection, 2



Specimens; Field Museum, 2018, watercolor

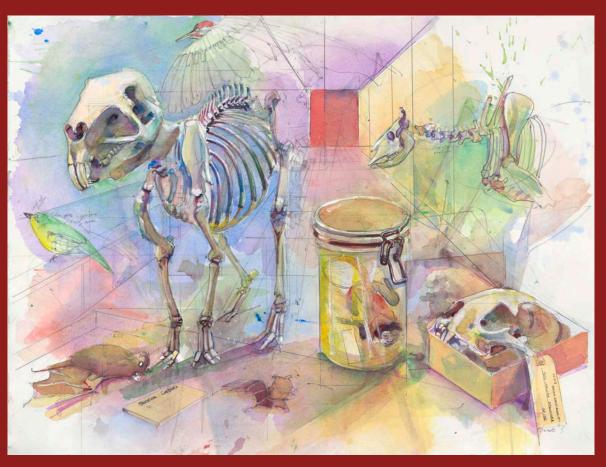
013, print from watercolor



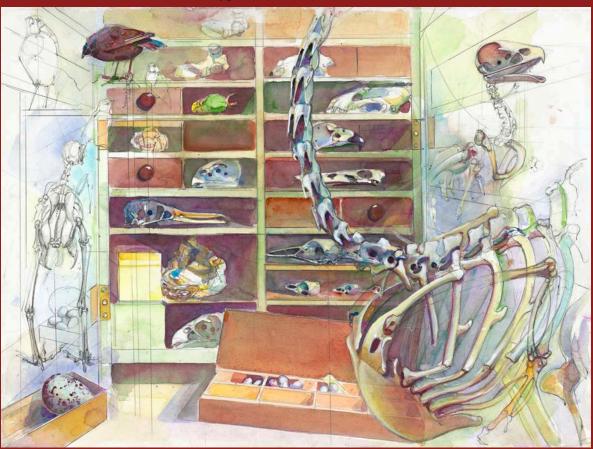
Frogs in a Jar in Collections, 2012, watercolor



Eggs with Prep Lab, 2017, watercolor



Capybar



Cabinet with Skulls, 2014, watercolor

2014, watercolor

Biographies

Meg Duguid is an artist and an arts administrator. She is currently the Executive Director of Columbia College Chicago's Department of Exhibition, Performing, and Student Spaces. She has curated numerous exhibitions including *Where the Future Came From*, an exhibition and resulting book exploring the history of feminist artist run spaces in Chicago from 1880-2018. Duguid, along with her partner Michael Thomas, is currently working to develop TheVisualist.org into a comprehensive and searchable cultural archive of artist-run projects and actions in Chicago. Duguid received her BFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and her MFA from Bard College.

Peggy Macnamara has served as the Artist-in-Residence at Chicago's Field Museum of Natural History since 1990 and as an Adjunct Professor at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago since 2001. Macnamara has traveled with Field Museum scientists all over the world to paint nature and illustrate conservation efforts. She 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. Macnamara's work has been reviewed in several publications including *Watercolor Artist Magazine, Passions Illustrated, Costco Magazine,* and the *Chicago Tribune*. In addition to conducting workshops across the country, Macnamara has presented numerous solo and group exhibitions at venues including Peggy Notebaert Nature Museum, Chicago Botanic Garden, Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary Audubon, Ding Darling National Wildlife Refuge, and the Miller Art Museum. A large collection of Macnamara's works is on permanent display at the Field Museum.

Mark Porter is a visual artist and arts administrator currently serving as the Senior Exhibitions Coordinator within the Department of Exhibitions, Performance and Student Spaces at Columbia College Chicago. Porter has curated several exhibitions held in the Glass Curtain Gallery including *Citizen Animalia, Skillshot: The Collaborative Art of Pinball* and *Machinations: Kinetic Sculptures in the Age of the Open-source*. His visual art practice is focused mainly on the creation of kinetic sculptures and drawings. Porter's work has been exhibited in museums, art centers and galleries nationally and internationally. His work has been published in several exhibition catalogs and independent publications including *State of Flux, Aesthetics of Fluid Materials*, and *Gambiólogos 2.0*. Porter received his BA and MA from Eastern Illinois University, Charleston, Illinois and MFA from the School of Art and Design at University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Michigan.

Acknowledgments

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Department of Exhibitions, Performance, and Student Spaces (DEPS) would also like to give special thanks to preparators Cassandra Meek and Jocelyn Rodriguez for assistance installing the exhibition, DEPS student staff Gray Beyer, Sierra Delamarter, Adele Hink, Rachel Manlubatan, and Sieanna Rowe for all of their fantastic work in the exhibitions production, installation, and the design of this catalog, and Cecilia L. Vargas for curatorial assistance. Additional thanks to Jonathan Michael Castillo for the installation photographs of the exhibition and Paul Lane for the photography of the individual artworks.

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department of exhibitions, performances & student space



