

Wild Honey & Ambrosia

Rachael McCampbell's inner eye is filled with wildlife and Greek myths

BY STEPHANIE STEWART
PHOTOS BY RON MANVILLE



It's a hot, sultry day, only a couple of weeks after the flood, when I make the drive out to Leipers Fork and the home—make that erowhile home—of artist Rachael McCampbell. I say that because the flooding creek, a good 20 feet over its bank, saw fit to chase McCampbell and her neighbors out of their houses, and at this stage, the cleanup is only just beginning. I tramp over debris in the yard, and knock on the door. In spite of everything, McCampbell is still using a room in her home as a studio while it dries out and the lower floor is almost completely rebuilt. Fans buzz, humidity thrives, but McCampbell is working intently.

The absence of furniture only makes the art more striking. Wherever I look, there are images from the Greek myths. Apollo chases Daphne, Paris chooses Aphrodite, the racing Atalanta is tricked by Hippomenes with golden apples and Demeter searches for her lost daughter Persephone. I lived in Greece as a child, so the stories are as familiar to me as Goldilocks and The Three Bears and Red Riding Hood are to most kids. The pictures are pieces of a series McCampbell is creating for a show at the Parthenon that began in late July—a show you can, and should, go see now—focused on women in Greek mythology.

Setting aside her ever-present art supplies, McCampbell tells me she was approached by the curator at the Parthenon to do the show, and after long consultations with Anne Christensen, an MBA instructor and authority on Greek mythology, she embarked on the project, painting the goddesses of ancient times.

"Normally, I paint wildlife," she says with a smile, waving her arm to indicate the simply enormous canvases hung high on the walls—rare birds fly across them, horses gallop, there's an ever-present sense of movement. Somehow, they look like they're in the right place with roses of headboard torn off, it's as if the wild and the mythic have invaded the lovely, hundred-year old home, and brought with them an intensity that defies the modern world.

For McCampbell, however, the artist's power doesn't change the fact that she's living elsewhere, and just hoping to get repairs done and her

yard cleaned up. The storm and the flood almost destroyed it all. There are still pieces of a washed-out bridge from down the way at the edge of her yard, and four extra cars that showed up have only just been removed.

"There was 3 feet of water outside the home, and I had about 15 minutes to get all the canvases upstairs," she says—the awfulness of the situation still very clear in her mind. "I was one of the last people to get across the road over there... there were three of us running upstairs carrying 4-by-8 canvases—they were my main concern besides my pets. Just as we finished, the water literally came rushing in the front door."

She was lucky to get out when she did, but says, "In hindsight, I wish I'd taken five more minutes and saved more." She did manage to get help for an elderly neighbor who was reluctant to leave home (McCampbell now lives in the house she was born in), too.

McCampbell references a diptych on her right. On one side is the goddess Athena, looking solemn and lovely. On the other, her perpetual nemesis, her uncle, the sea god Poseidon—with an admirable set of pees. "It might be my fault," she says, humor intact. "I was painting Poseidon losing this battle when the flood happened—my friends tease me about that."



She's only a few weeks out from the show, and she's still working on more big canvases (yes, they're for sale)—the next is to be the story of Ariadne, which she'll actually be working on live in the Parthenon during the show. Looking at the canvases, I can't help but think some of the faces look familiar. McCampbell pre-emptively thought by telling me she uses local models. I think jewelry designer Robin Haley, who I wrote about last month, is perfect as one of the three Graces. "I'd wanted to do one more before the show, of Perithous and Achilles, but the flood happened, so it had to be let go."

McCampbell hasn't spent her life here, but she's a real Tennessean. Raised in Knoxville on a farm—hence perhaps her interest in horses and wildlife as subject matter—she studied fine arts at the University of Georgia. Post college she headed to Europe, and found herself in Florence, designing fabrics for the legendary firm of Emilio Pucci. She followed this with work in art galleries in New York, a year in London studying fine arts at Christie's auction house and time in Los Angeles working in the contemporary art world, directing a gallery.

In the process of her travels, McCampbell realized more and more she wanted to make art. She began to shift her talents toward working as a commercial artist, doing advertising and creating book covers for publishing companies in New York, Los Angeles and San Francisco. During it all, she married and divorced, and found herself raising a son.

In 1999, McCampbell made the decision to take her own artistic endeavors full time. About six years ago, she began making regular visits to the Nashville area, recalling her Tennessee upbringing. She discovered the Leipers Fork area accidentally. After a flight was cancelled, she rented a car and decided to explore the area. In 2008, she decided to move to the gentle little town, and rented a house, eight months, on the Internet.

Shortly thereafter, McCampbell mentioned to Leipers Fork's visionary preservationist Aubrey Preston that she wanted particular things in a house to buy. "I wanted a creek, an old property with squeaky doors and beadboard walls, really set in nature," McCampbell says, grinning. As it turned out, Preston had the house for her. Across the street is a large acreage of conservation easement (courtesy of Preston, it's part of the Land Trust for Tennessee) and behind the house, as is now obvious, is flood plain—so it's assumed the area will stay relatively undeveloped.



Photos by Ron Manville, except for Parthenon images. Titles: Left, From Heaven, Eminent Storm, Make-up by Morgan, When Every Man; Middle, From Heaven, Eminent Storm; Right, From Heaven, Eminent Storm. All artwork by Rachael McCampbell.



"I love it here," she says. "You have to make some adjustments coming from a city of 10 million to one of 500 or so, but it comes with great things. If your dog is sick, someone will bring you a casserole."

Clearly, it's where McCampbell belongs, and where she intends to stay—even floods can't keep her out. Given her work, inspired as it is by dreams and archetypes, by nature and inner visions, we shouldn't be surprised that she craves such surroundings.

Her art continues to garner new respect, in and out of the area. A show last year at Tinsley Contemporary titled "Endangered Heritage: Nature in the Balance" not only brought in great reviews, but allowed her to showcase different aspects of her talents, like sculpture using a combination of black and fossil objects. The show focused on endangered and extinct animals and birds, and made a strong statement about the interrelation between species, the tragedy of the loss of them and the hope of preservation that exists yet.

Horses and birds dominate many of her canvases. Smaller canvases with birds juxtaposed with elements of distinctly culture-specific art and architecture is both visually delightful and evokes a sense of the mystical, the collective unconscious and the universal symbolism of the avian world.

McCampbell's use of color is sometimes subtle, but always intense. "I see everything in color," she tells me. "You're wearing black, but I look at it and see blues, greens, purples—it's just how I am." That sense of color is even black and white comes through on the canvases, helping to add intensity, light and movement to her vision. With her regular use of vast canvases, the effects are powerful.

If you haven't taken the time to familiarize yourself with this local artist—er, let's be honest, any of the remarkable local fine artists that are challenging Nashville's concept of the visual arts right now—then it's the right time to do it. You can take in Rachael McCampbell's glorious take on the goddesses of Greece at the Parthenon from July 20 through Nov 27 in the East Gallery in the Parthenon.

For more information, visit rachaelmccampbell.com.