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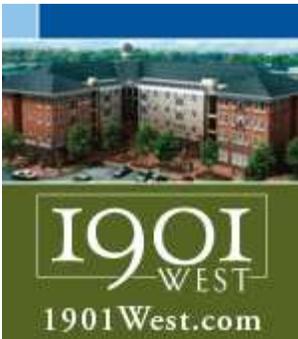
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'Species X' is one woman's homage to loss

By JANICE F. BOOTH For The Capital

Opening Saturday, the DeMatteis Gallery on inner West Street will present a one-woman show.

The event, which runs through Jan. 15, will display multi-media panels by Gail Hillow Watkins, visual meditations on extinct species, "Species X." All of the artist's profits from the sale of the works will be donated to The Chesapeake Bay Foundation.

"It is only fitting that the foundation should benefit from the show because one of its goals is the protection of endangered species," said Mrs. Watkins.

The artist taught fine arts for many years at St. John's College in Annapolis. Her work is owned by major collections and is exhibited nationally. She studied at the Corcoran and American University in Washington, as well as the British Institute in Florence and the Academie de la Grande Chaumiere in Paris.

Working with canvas, wood, paint, varnish and color newsprint - specifically comics - Mrs. Watkins has paid homage to loss. With blended texture and color, raised figures hidden within fresco-like surfaces, textures recalling antique silk and wool tapestries where glistening threads of color trail away to shadows, figures barely discernible, the sense of loss is haunting.

Her works - The Dusky Seaside Sparrow, the Eastern Elk, the Maryland Darter, the Stellar Sea Cow and more - evoke memories of dappled waterways and still forest glens, rocky coastlines and sandy beaches.

Mrs. Watkins' panels resemble ancient icons, sacred images that are honored, even worshiped. These icons do not honor long-dead saints but extinct birds, mammals and fish that once shared our planet.

Sculpting and molding panels of wood with paper stencils, Mrs. Watkins resurrects these extinct forms. After sanding, and varnishing layers of newsprint comics, she coaxes them back - birds, fish and mammals, their forms indistinct and evocative.

"There ? and not there," is how the artist describes her images.

Ancient, fading images have captured Mrs. Watkins' imagination since she traveled as an art student to Pompeii and Tuscany in Italy, to study the antique frescoes and half-buried mosaics.

"I loved the weedy ruins at Pompeii," she said. "At that time, no one had come to restore the city, and bits of color were just discernible on the crumbling walls."

Mrs. Watkins deepened her appreciation of Italian culture and art. Until recently, she spent summers as "Artist in Residence" in the city of Cortona, a village in Tuscany, wandering through Florentine churches and villas, studying fading tapestries and crumbling frescoes.

Some may wonder how Mrs. Watkins' fascination with ancient Mediterranean art came to focus on extinct animal species. Her daughter, marine biologist Elizabeth W. North, gave her a book about extinct animals, where beautiful plates of these lost creatures adorned the text. Predictably, the artist was moved to apply her artistry to those creatures that live only in memory.

Mixed with conversations she has had with her daughter, are impressions from recent trips made by Mrs. Watkins and her husband, Dr. Stanley Watkins, to visit their son, Dr. Stanly Watkins, a cardiologist in Alaska.

The fossils and glaciers of Alaska deepened her awareness of layering, the sense that all of nature is part of something larger, if we can only recognize the patterns and synergies.

Don't look for the Monk Seal or the Carolina Parakeet when you pause before one of Mrs. Watkins' paintings. Instead, peer into the haze of form and color, and there, a form resembling some ancient Coptic icon emerges.

- No Jumps-

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