

Jan Martin McGuire



*Winter Red* (acrylic, 11 x 14")

## A Tomboy Who Loves the Big Outdoors

BY LAURA ZUCKERMAN

---Admirers of Jan Martin McGuire's wildlife paintings—and they are legion—may feel compelled to launch a campaign to keep her at home in Oklahoma after learning of her love for the rugged beauty of the Rocky Mountain West. This past fall, McGuire traveled from Livingston, Mont., to Jackson, Wyo., and was freshly struck by the realization that she would be hard-pressed to submit to the dictates of her studio in those scenic surroundings. "I would be seduced by the view," she says. "I could never paint there; I'd want to be outside."

It is easy to imagine the teen-age tomboy that the 52-year-old McGuire once was, climbing trees, showing horses and turning over rocks with a sense of endless interest in the life below. Traipsing through the heights and the valleys of her native Colorado, McGuire's parents often encountered the budding naturalist only at mealtimes or when she busied herself drafting field guides based on her adventures. "My parents



Jan Martin McGuire was shooting resource photos in the Masai Mara National Reserve in Kenya when this cheetah jumped on the hood of her car. "That's not unusual," she says. "Cheetahs often climb atop termite mounds to look for prey, and one day a cheetah decided that car hoods were higher. She may be gone now but her offspring still climb on cars."

recognized me and accepted me for what I was: a tomboy who loved the big outdoors," recalls McGuire. She still does.

When McGuire is not in her studio, nestled in the oak woodlands of the Osage Indian Reservation near Bartlesville, Okla., she and husband, James Gary Hines II, are staging photo safaris in Africa, roaming the remote regions of the American West or exploring the Amazon in search—and in celebration—of the animals that are her life and livelihood.

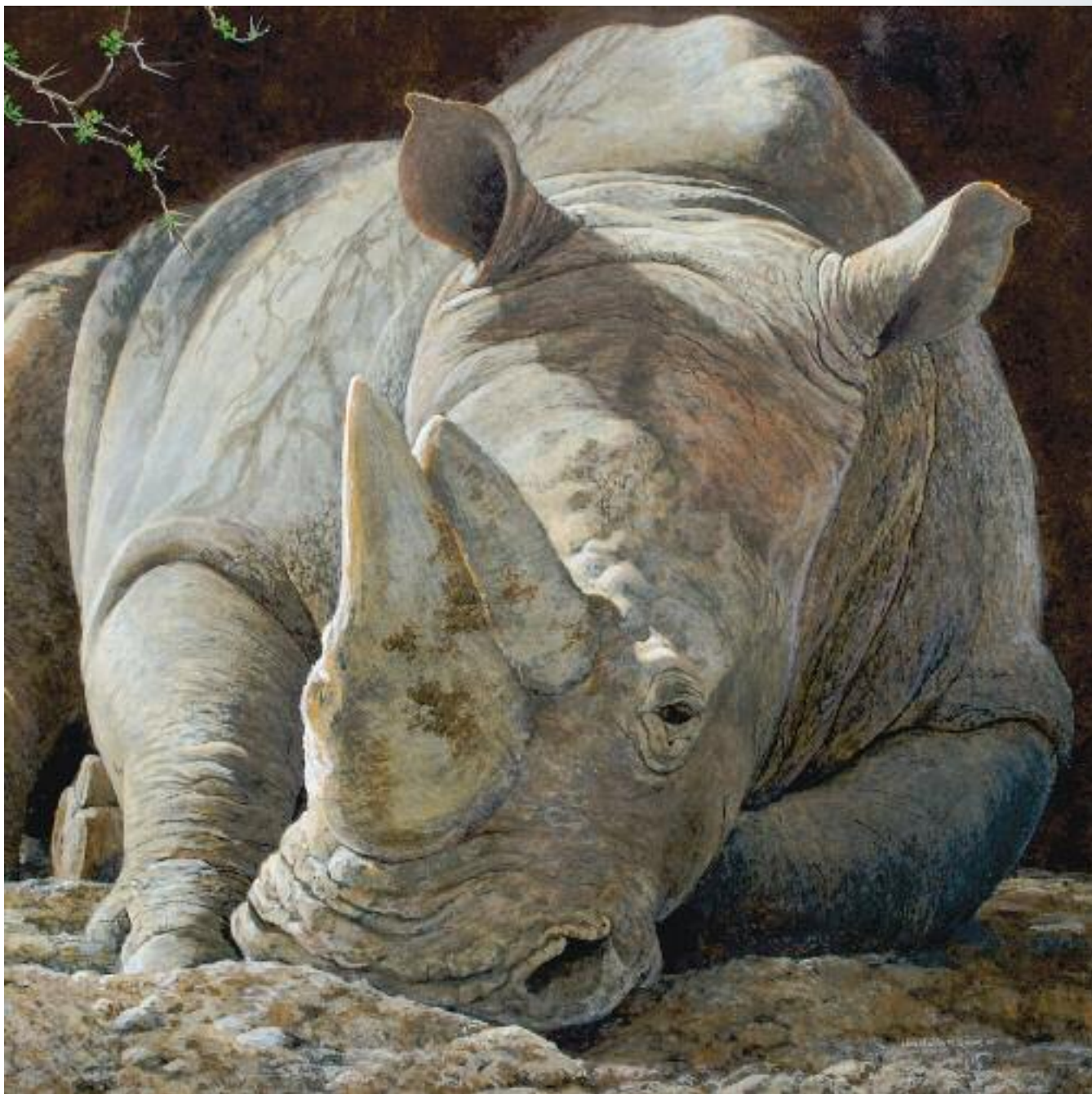
With seeming effortlessness, McGuire, whose work has been exhibited at such leading institutions as the Smithsonian and the Natural History Museum in London, pairs her passion for painting wildlife with causes that benefit the creatures she loves. She has been named the 2008 Conservation Artist of the Year by Safari Club International (SCI), a group that promotes hunting and wildlife conservation in more than 100 countries. SCI will auction

McGuire's painting of a pride of lions, *Simba Shadows* (shown on the cover), at its annual January convention in Reno, Nev., with proceeds going to the organization's conservation programs.

## ***Donates to African Wildlife Foundation***

McGuire also has been selected as Featured Artist this spring for the African Wildlife Foundation (AWF), an organization pledged to protect Africa's wild animals and wild lands. Unsolicited, McGuire is donating a percentage of profits from an upcoming one-person exhibit at the Forbes Galleries in New York—that elite collection's first spotlight on an artist who is equally an advocate of animals and realism—to AWF to advance its cause.

Keats said a thing of beauty will never pass into nothingness. Writing in the early 19th century, the poet was not the first to



*Resting Rhino* (acrylic, 20 x 20")



*Black, White and Pink* (acrylic, 12 x 24")

***"I'm hoping my work will speak for nature after I'm gone."***

***—Jan Martin McGuire***

suggest that works of art confer a kind of immortality. McGuire is a staunch believer in the need to preserve wild creatures and wild areas and she has faith that her art—testimonies in acrylic on masonite of her motto that life is in the details—will stand for future generations as a legacy of love. "There are a lot of ways to talk about nature," she says. "I'm hoping my work will speak for nature after I'm gone."

It is speaking even now. The enigmatic look cast by the rhinoceros in *Resting Rhino* speaks volumes about the creature's place on a planet ever at war with its own. The rhinoceros, a bulwark against the ravages of a continent chronically under siege politically and economically, symbolizes what is ageless on the earth: an animal so in harmony with itself and its environment that the lines between the two are hardly distinguishable by the eye and inseparable in spirit.

If McGuire has an objective in her adherence to realism, it is to imitate the details of nature as a method of honoring it. "Tight artists worry about the need to loosen up, and we struggle all the time to make our point," she says. "We appreciate loose art, but it's not who we are. Once I start a painting, I can't leave it alone. I love the detail of nature: the bark, the moss, each blade of grass. I don't want people to stand in front of my paintings and say, 'It's a great painting.' I want them to hear the wind, feel the fur."

Or revel in the glory. Examine *Elegance*, McGuire's tableau of trumpeter swans stopping by brush on a snowy pond. The piece suggests there is an infinite number of ways to paint white: the white of down feathers, the white of snow, the white woven into the rippled fabric of the water. Light glides across the wetness with intention, like the formation of swans in flight. There is nothing incidental—not one brushstroke—and if serendipity

has a role, it is that the painting is a pictorial approximation of the sentiment expressed by Robert Frost in the opening lines of *Looking for a Sunset Bird in Winter*: "The west was getting out of gold/ The breath of air had died of cold."

### ***Inspired by Bateman***

It has taken more than two decades for McGuire to refine a mature style that is separate, but admiring, of wildlife artist Robert Bateman, acknowledged as a master of the genre. It was a Bateman print, *White-Footed Mouse in Wintergreen*, which she encountered in a publication, that fostered McGuire's desire to paint wildlife. "I learned he offered workshops; I stalked him," she says, laughing. On a more serious note, she adds, "Most of what I'm doing now expands on what he taught me."



*Saguaro Skeleton* (acrylic, 20 x 24")

McGuire's parents encouraged her artistic leanings while she was still an adolescent. In an attempt to ease her unhappiness at age 12 with the family's move from Colorado to Oklahoma, her mother enrolled her in classes at the Philbrook Museum of Art in Tulsa. A museum staffer suggested life drawing, missing in the exchange the matter of McGuire's age. "I go in and sit down with my pad," McGuire recalls. "In walks a woman wearing a silk robe—and drops it. I still remember the look on my dad's face when I showed him my drawing."

Later, McGuire and a kindly but esoteric art teacher in high school engaged in a battle of wills about modes of art. "He would discuss things like the artistic utility of spoons, and I would spend my time sketching," she says. "He'd say, 'Jannie, put your pencil down or go to the office.' I'd say, 'Great, send me to the office for drawing in art class.'"

The experience was a precursor to the challenges about her style that McGuire would encounter in college. She enrolled in art courses at the University of Tulsa in the 1970s only to learn later she had to unlearn all that her instructors were teaching. That came naturally. McGuire had acknowledged early on in her academic career that she was a poor fit for professors who were applauding the extremes in abstract art. "That wasn't where my heart was," she says. "I thought, 'I don't need this; I'm out of here.'"

McGuire devoted her energies to her riding school—horses being her first love—and embellished calendars with art. She

married and had a daughter. She baked cakes, made cookies and gave dinner parties. She folded her husband's socks just the way he liked and had meals promptly on the table when he came home from work. She was deeply unhappy. "I was living someone else's life," says McGuire.

In the early 1990s, she attended a workshop in Yellowstone National Park and spent her off-hours sitting in the woods, listening to the elk bugle, the squirrels chatter. She returned to Oklahoma and asked her husband for a divorce. "I knew I was a better artist, and I knew the way I was living was the problem," McGuire says.

## *Finds New Life in Pet Store*

She was seeking a nesting box for her cockatiel at a pet and agriculture store when she found Hines. "I went in one day and I went back several times and this cute guy kept waiting on me," she says. Finally, McGuire asked Hines, "So you don't have a ring on your finger—does that mean you're not married?" Hines responded, "That's exactly what that means," which prompted McGuire to invite him for a drink. Asked today—15 years later—what he thought at that moment, Hines responds, "I'm a guy. When an attractive gal invites you out for a drink, there's no thought."

McGuire and Hines are partners and equals in every way.



*Elegance* (acrylic, 20 x 24")



*Cat's Eye View* (acrylic, 30 x 15")

Hines is the talent behind many of the photos McGuire works from and, more importantly, he is her ballast and her firm fan. "Artists have to have a support system in order to create," says McGuire. "Creative people can be ... well ... creative. We're on a different radio station altogether. I was married before and it was the wrong station. My first husband would come home and say, 'Why isn't the house clean?' James comes home and says, 'Why are you cleaning the house?'"

Hines has first viewing rights, and McGuire counts on his initial critique. "I get blinders on and can't see the painting," she says. "All artists experience this. It's like looking at yourself in the mirror; you see everything that's wrong. Every night, I bring out the painting and put it on the fireplace. If his immediate reaction is everything's OK, then it's OK. I don't want to wait until it's framed and hanging in a gallery to learn something is not ringing true."

In a sign that McGuire's artistry—and her instinct—is invariably



*Sun Spots* (acrylic, 24 x 18")

on pitch, her paintings are as suited to their surroundings in New York as they are in the permanent collection of Vermont's Bennington Center for the Arts.

Margaret Kelly Trombly, vice president of the Forbes Collection, says McGuire's pieces will serve as a refreshing counterpoint to urban New York City—which some have described as a jungle. The show, *Painting Safari: Jan Martin McGuire's Scenes from the African Wild*, runs from March 21 to May 3. It will feature 40 paintings, work that Trombly says "captures the beauty of these animals in their natural environment" and will be of intense interest to the business movers and shakers who frequent Forbes.

Although McGuire is not an aficionado of abstract expressionism, she is unabashed about borrowing from giants of that aesthetic, such as Franz Kline (1910-1962). *Sun Spots*, McGuire's arresting composition depicting a leopard lazing in the top reaches of a leafless tree, refers to Kline's signature black-and-white works, which in turn have been likened to Japanese calligraphy. McGuire exhibits the same command of positive and negative space in *Cat's Eye View*, where cougar and tree act as the vertical counterpart of *Sun Spots*. McGuire employs a flattening device in the two

paintings, a visual allusion to the eternal action of predators over the kingdom of prey. The pieces are in contrast to paintings like *Resting Rhino*, where McGuire plays with light and shadow to lend depth and moderate drama.


## Vitality Shines Through

*Sun Spots* is evidence of the breadth of McGuire's influences and her ability to shape-shift just when her patrons believe they have her pegged. "There are those artists who make the mistake of letting themselves get pigeon-holed," she says. For McGuire, no brushstroke goes unnoticed, but it does not follow that one painting mimics another. Her work stands out for the same reason that the eye is inclined to fasten on the Oklahoma artist amid a roomful of people: her paintings and her personality resonate with vitality.

Do not doubt that McGuire is in control—and she has earned it. "The more you practice, the better you are," she says. "I've had 25 years to develop and hone my craft. When I sit down to paint, I know what the paint is going to do. I'm not spending a moment going, 'This isn't doing what I want it to do.' If after 25 years I don't know what's going to happen, I'm in trouble."

McGuire is incapable of receiving without giving back,

and her prime causes are conservation-oriented. She routinely donates time to Wolf Park, a wolf education and research facility in Battle Ground, Ind., with her "Wolves for Artists" seminar, scheduled this year from March 7-9. "I believe in what they do," says McGuire. "They are the only facility that studies the science of behavior with socialized wolves. The wolves think that their humans are part of the pack, so they act naturally."

Plato believed art sprang from genius; Freud, from the subconscious. McGuire is not one to ponder the source of the creative drive but she has learned from experience—the teacher through necessity—that it has little to do with the tools of her trade. "What number brushes you use, what paints—this has nothing to do with art," she says. "True art comes from inside you, and the best art comes from the heart. The whole thing about art is about being who you are. I have no choice; I'm just lucky to be able to make a living out of it." 

*Laura Zuckerman is a free-lance writer living in Salmon, Idaho.*

*McGuire is represented by The Legacy Gallery, Jackson, Wyo., and Scottsdale, Ariz., and Settlers West Galleries, Tucson, Ariz.*

Images courtesy of the artist.



*A Gaggle of Vulturines (acrylic, 16 x 20")*