

Artist found inspiration in her own backyard



A trio of swans float on the water in this painting by Carol Guzman. Guzman's series of bird portraits was inspired by the avians in her own backyard.

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By RACHEL HERGETT, Chronicle Staff Writer

Artist Carol Guzman's Backyard Birds series isn't just songbirds.

A feeder outside her house attracts Bullock's orioles, lazuli buntings and blackheaded grosbeaks but Guzman's back yard is the Shields River Valley, where there is no short supply of bird watching opportunities.

Water ouzels, swans and pelicans cavort near the river. Waxwings eat apple blossoms from her trees. Sandhill cranes call from the fields as bank swallows swoop overhead.

"It's a beautiful symphony," said Guzman, who captures the birds first with a digital Nikon, then uses those images as the basis of her oil paintings.

Guzman's fascination with birds began in Phillips County, where the Bozeman-based American Prairie Foundation is securing a wildlife preserve. Through her husband, fellow artist Clyde Aspevig, who is on the APF board, Guzman was introduced to the birds of the prairie habitat, and the art and hobby of birding.

"It's a completely new, fun world," she said. The series, is not only the most cohesive she has produced, but also the most enjoyable thus far.

"As far as groups of paintings, it's the first time they show all one thing," said Guzman, who is perhaps best known for still-lives of antique toys, Native American dress and household items. Still, she said the winged subjects continue to fascinate.

"I like the idea," she said. "I like the richness of colors, the shapes of the birds, the light on the birds."

A portion of the profits from the sale of Guzman's Backyard Birds will be donated to the Montana Raptor Conservation Center, a Bozeman-based nonprofit that rehabilitates raptors with the goal of releasing them back into the wild.

The organization was chosen because of its bird connection, even though Guzman's current work doesn't depict any raptors. That deficit is a matter of logistics. In order for Guzman to paint the birds, she must have a series of photographs from different angles and in different lights.

"I really want to take them myself," she said. "I can get a sense of how they move on the ground, how they sit in trees, how they fly and how they react to me."

It's the reaction of the larger raptors that worries Guzman, even though she has a newly acquired walking blind to shoot photos from.

"I'd like to get pictures of the harriers, but they attack," she said.

Guzman said she has considered taking pictures of the birds in the confines of the MRCC facility, but prefers them in their natural habitat.

"There are three golden eagles that live on our property," she said. "Well, we live on their property."

The golden eagles may stick out from the crowd, however other birds aren't so easy to identify.

"You can't know them all," Aspevig said.

Even with both illustrated and photographic guides and CDs of bird calls, identifying the species can be complicated, especially when they may sound and look similar.

"The little birds that sing I don't know very well, but I'm going to learn," Guzman said. Others, she refers to fondly as "LGBs" or "little grey birds."

No matter the type of bird -- songbird, raptor, waterfowl - Guzman has taken an active interest in exploring avian species through her art.

Aside from the obvious skill in her work, Guzman's strength lies in her inventiveness, according to Aspevig.

"She's not afraid to put herself out there, to take risks subject matter wise," Aspevig said. "The unexpected creates excitement with the viewer."

Guzman is the featured artist at Tierney Fine Art for the June ArtWalk today in downtown Bozeman. A reception from 6 to 8 p.m. will feature the Backyard Bird series and a live raptor from the MRCC.

Guzman said she felt a bit like a parent letting go of her children when hanging her paintings in the gallery last week.

"The studio is an empty nest," she said. "They're all gone now."

Soon, it will be again filled with new birds Guzman can release into the world.

For more information, visit <http://montanaraptor.org>, www.tierneyfineart.com or www.carolguzman.com.

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