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Wildlife art finds temporary home in museum

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Artist Gwynn Murrill poses in front of her work June 12 at the Weisman Museum of Art at Pepperdine University in Malibu. Photo by Trisha Anas/TMT.

Renowned artist holds exhibit in Malibu featuring her early works from the 1970s

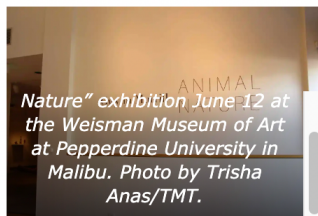
By Trisha Anas

Special to The Malibu Times

Snakes, hawks, vultures and cats wandered into the Weisman Museum of Art at Pepperdine University last month.

But don't worry, they won't bite – they're sculptures.

Described as a retrospective exhibition, "Animal Nature" features animal and human sculptures made by artist Gwynn Murrill from a wide array of materials, including bronze, laminated wood and marble.



"Bobcat Maquette," a bronze sculpture Gwynn Murrill made in 2018 is shown on display June 12 at the Weisman Museum of Art at Pepperdine University in Malibu. Photo by Trisha Anas/TMT.

Murrill was 21 years old when she first discovered her passion for sculpting. Her first piece was a rocking horse, made out of a few blocks of wood she found on a construction site.

In an interview with Weisman interim director Andrea Gyorody, Murrill said that she initially studied painting, but got into sculptures when she was required to take a few classes to graduate at UCLA.

“The idea of making sculpture was new and exciting, and I wanted to learn more about it,” Murrill said. “My painting professors left me alone and thought it was really silly what I was doing. Being the rebel that I was made me feel like I was discovering something new about myself.”

Murrill said that when it came to animal sculptures, she wanted to make them feel alive.

“I’ve seen plenty of sculptures in the United States, especially animals, that do not have life to them,” Murrill said. “They have ears, eyes, fur and so on, but they just stand there like statues. I didn’t want my sculpture to look like that.”

The show was first initiated by the late Michael R. Zakian, who passed away in 2020, and was later curated by Gyorody, who worked closely with Murrill to determine which pieces to include.

Gyorody said that while there were more than several pieces on display, the exhibit featured only a fraction of what Murrill had in her studio.

“[The experience] was very collaborative between myself and Gywnn in terms of which works we would include,” Gyorody said. “We talked a lot about trying to represent the breadth of her career. This is a broad range of work in all of the materials that she’s worked in. I think in the end, we both made compromises in order for it to be a cohesive and thoughtful show that gave people a sense of her career.”

The exhibit was also giving away coloring books, which featured illustrations of Murrill's work, drawn by Pepperdine alumnus Carson Vandermade. Donations to the Wallis Annenberg Wildlife Crossing for the books were encouraged.

Both Murrill and Gyorody said they had a good turnout during the opening reception last month despite the pandemic.

"It has been a good, steady stream of visitors I would say," Gyorody said. "We're not back at the levels we had pre-pandemic, but we have a lot of really engaged visitors. What I've noticed is that there isn't necessarily a rush of people coming through the doors all the time, but people who do come spend a lot of time looking and really engaging with the work."

Murrill said that she was glad to have Gyorody there to help her decide which pieces would be featured in the show.

"I wouldn't have been able to pick them out because there's a whole bunch of them," Murrill said. "She was good at looking at the space [in the museum] and knowing how much sculpture to put in there."

One of her more ambitious and difficult pieces featured in the exhibit, Murrill said, was her 2019 piece "Vultures on a Tree."

"I took a dead tree and had to cut it up, and then I had to have it redone all in bronze," Murrill said. "I had to figure out how to make the birds all stand up there. It was a fairly big engineering problem."

Gyorody said that it was interesting and fun to be able to collaborate with Murrill because of the perspectives that they both had to offer.

"I think the most fun we had was when I would find things in the studio that she hadn't envisioned being on view in an exhibition, like some of the smaller ceramic works that she's made more recently," Gyorody said. "There was a nice give and take between the two of us."

Gyorody said that Murrill was very down-to-earth when it came to her work.

"Gwynn is great," Gyorody said. "She has a good sense of humor and she is not exactly self-deprecating, but I think she is truly modest about her work and what she's managed to achieve."

The exhibit runs until July 31, so art enthusiasts have plenty of time to see Murrill's work in person. For more information on the exhibit visit, art.pepperdine.edu.

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