

Wildlife artist from Chalk Hill receives top honor at exhibit



Connie Shoaf of Chalk Hill received the Best of Show award at the Sixth Regional Juried Fine Art and Craft Exhibition at Touchstone Center for Crafts in Farmington for her painting “Mountain Pride,” an acrylic–on–canvas depiction of a mother bear and two cubs framed by trees crafted from genuine pine bark.

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By Les Harvath

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Although it may be unofficial and in its early stages, artist Connie Shoaf of Chalk Hill may someday find her name identified with a new genre.

Recipient of the Best of Show award at the Sixth Regional Juried Fine Art and Craft Exhibition at Touchstone Center for Crafts in Farmington, Shoaf received the honor for her painting “Mountain Pride,” an acrylic–on–canvas depiction of a mother bear and two cubs framed by trees crafted from genuine pine bark.

Beverly DeMotte, president of the Uniontown Art Club, sponsor of the event, recognized Shoaf “as a dedicated artist, meticulous about her work. She paints every day and paints in a realistic style. She has a passion for her work, a passion for art and for nature and blends nature into her work. Connie mixes two- and three-dimensional aspects into her paintings by adding (tree) bark and/or feathers to her pieces. She raises two- and three-dimensional concepts to a higher level of quality.”

DeMotte, who taught art for 34 years at Uniontown High School and has served as supervising teacher for art students at Waynesburg University, added that Shoaf’s work was chosen for the award by juror Loretta Radeschi from Bedford, who previously selected pieces for the exhibit.

In previous exhibits at Touchstone, Shoaf received several “People’s Choice” awards, selected by the exhibits’ visitors.

After taking art classes at Carnegie Museum in Pittsburgh and Carnegie-Mellon University when she was in elementary school, Shoaf, who graduated from Pittsburgh’s Westinghouse High School and studied commercial art after high school, has literally been painting all her life. Since retiring some 15 years ago

from her post as a graphic illustrator, she has devoted more time to her painting which, she says, is all about nature.

Of course, living in a heavily wooded area and having a painting studio loft, which looks out over that wooded property into nature, provides a unique perspective for Shoaf, who has been selling her art for some 20 years.

"I'm fortunate that my painting studio looks out into nature, which enables me to focus on wildlife," said Shoaf, 73. "I paint eight hours a day in the winter but cut back to four hours a day in the summer to take advantage of the weather and be outside in nature, which is the subject of my work. I focus on some of the wildlife I see from my loft. Nature and wildlife are my inspiration, and bears are some of my favorite subjects, representing part of the overall wildlife appeal. Additionally, I prefer to paint the natural colors I find in nature."

For the 24-by-36-inch "Mountain Pride," Shoaf framed her subjects with the pine bark to make it appear they are standing among the trees, she explained. "Somehow, I just came up with this idea of adding bark or feathers to my art to add a more naturalistic appeal." Shoaf chuckled at the suggestion that a new genre combining tree bark and feathers is in the offing but added that her style is as of yet nameless.

A hawk that has taken up residence in a tree on Shoaf's property has inspired her on several occasions to paint hawks, and she is currently painting a male turkey fan, which includes about 50 feathers, she noted.

Shoaf, in atypical fashion, paints her subjects sans easel, instead painting while kneeling on the floor.

"Sometimes, I'm painting that way for eight hours a day, and it's taxing on my knees," she said, chuckling. "But when I stand, I get a different perspective, and that's how I see where I have to make any changes."

Shoaf's pieces have been seen and sold at craft shows in Ligonier, Seven Springs, Covered Bridge (Washington County), Dravosburg and the Woodland Zoo on Route 40, as well as in the Christmas Shop in Chalk Hill. Although she sells "a good bit" of what she creates, she stops short of referring to herself as a professional artist.

"I'm just not sure where you draw the line from being an amateur to a professional," she said, "and I'm working on a website to appeal to a larger audience."

Shoaf's biggest sellers include wildlife paintings on slate, "Wildlife of all types, including, bears, raccoons, squirrels," she noted, but added that she also paints "saws and wooden slabs."

In fact, one of her favorite memories stems from a 6 a.m. call she received from a fellow who raised bulls.

"He wanted a saw blade painted with a bull's image," Shoaf recalls, adding that the bull's name was Joe. "That blade was about 5 feet long, and I painted Joe the bull for him. When the fellow saw the blade, he cried."

Les Harvath is a freelance writer.

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