

Creatures with a purpose: the heightened 'naturalism' of Skagit Valley painter Robert McCauley

By Michael Upchurch



ROBERT MCCAULEY
"Hide Your Good Work"

There's a wry, punctured beauty to Robert McCauley's impeccably painted, eccentrically conceived oils on canvas — and one thing that does the puncturing is McCauley's way with a title.

Take "Hide Your Good Work." It portrays a rather doleful sea turtle pushing its way out of a matte-black shadow world. The patterns and colors of the creature's fins, shell and wrinkled neck are exquisitely rendered, as is the dull sheen of its left eye's nictitating membrane.

But two things make the piece more than just a fastidious bit of nature painting. One is the spelling out of its title in elegant gray lettering just below the turtle's front flippers. The other is a tidy broken line near the top of the canvas, hinting at a level of consciousness that won't be breached by the purposeful creature below.

Poet Billy Collins, a fan, pinpoints the curious effects these quirks trigger when he notes how McCauley's "distinctive animals manage to seem literal and symbolic at the same time."

"Hide Your Good Work" is one of 13 new paintings by the Mount Vernon-born artist, newly returned to the Skagit Valley after many years at Rockford College in Illinois, where he was a professor and chairman of the art department. There are a wide range of concepts in the show but a brilliant consistency of technique.

In his artist's statement, McCauley cites as influences conceptual artists John Baldessari and Joseph Kosuth (both incorporate text in their work), while the painting's bravura brush-stroke prowess is a nod to

Frederick Church and Albert Bierstadt. The Pacific Northwest's turbulent skies, gelid waters, fir-dark foothills and ice-capped volcanoes are an indelible part of his vision, too.

Throw a camera-viewfinder perspective into the mix, and you've got quite a heady brew. "Open Water," for instance, masterfully captures roiling, gleaming ocean waves beneath a clouded twilight sky, but with the whole effect undermined by four "+" marks that target a smaller rectangle of waves in the center of the canvas.

Instead of losing yourself in the "open water" of the title, you find yourself distracted by the implied off-canvas presence of another observer who distorts what you see.

"Moments After Capsizing" pulls off a similar trick, with some gallows humor. Its underwater view of a magnificent octopus, its tentacles all a-dance, is punctuated on the lower right by a rising trail of air bubbles. Whoever is seeing this, McCauley suggests, is seeing it with their last exhaled breath, before sinking into the depths.

"Trained to See Only Paintings" is one of only a few land-set paintings in the show, and it shares its title with an earlier oil on canvas that took a slightly different approach to identical subject matter.

In the new painting, an enormous harvested log on a crude wooden trestle dominates the composition. But just above it, a pointily picturesque volcano is cordoned off in broken, rectangular outline. The painting slyly comments on how we edit what we have in view.

McCauley is usually so meticulous in his rendering of his creatures' natural color that they'd serve well as field-guide illustrations. But here and there he takes a turn for the surreal.

"Not About Red Herrings" is a nod to Magritte's "This Is Not a Pipe." In it, two red fish you'd never find in nature are divided by the punning title, which acknowledges that the term's figurative meaning (for a deceptive narrative device) is more familiar to most people than the smoke-reddened dried-fish comestible.

There's even less that's natural about "Whatever," in which the disembodied head of a red buck floats nonchalantly above a cloudscape. The animal's luridly ruddy hue heightens the painting's drama and enigma, while the title — inserted along a dotted line that transects the buck's neck — nicely sabotages the piece's potential grandeur.

This is fascinating work, filled with bristling tensions and feisty mystery.