

culture



Resting in the Lascaux Cave by Jeff McNear

A League of Their Own

From mythological-inspired prints to figurative landscapes that capture the simple beauty of daily routine, this year's Members Art Show from the North Shore Art League in Winnetka offers works for every taste and style. By Abigail Foerstner

Glance at a print by Evanston artist Jeff McNear and you're likely to be enveloped in a world of wonderful dichotomies: past and present, myth and reality, antiquity and modernity, hope and pain. Since the precocious age of 8, when young McNear debuted in his first gallery show of Japanese crayon drawings, he's been pulling inspiration from far and wide, creating works that retell iconic stories with contemporary panache.

"I know that one piece was inspired by the James Bond movie *Goldfinger*," laughs McNear, a sculptor who turned to linoleum block printmaking a decade ago. "And a lithograph of a highly stylized killer whale done by a Native American artist from the Pacific Northwest" sparked another drawing.

McNear's works will be just one of the many unique styles at this year's North Shore Art League's Annual Members Art Show, from Sept. 9-17 at



The timelessness of Midwest landscapes is the key hallmark of works by Mary McCarthy, including *Morning Shadows*.

the Winnetka Community House, a one-stop shopping destination for works in all media. Some 150 area artists, offering creations as varied as McNear's inspirations, will be on display, including the landscapes of Winnetka painter Nancy Behles and impressionist pieces by Mary McCarthy of Kenilworth.

Behles describes her portraits as "figurative landscapes." Joyfully quiet, contemplative or even sleeping, her figures fold into cushy chairs or walk with somnambulant grace. Children making snow angels and skipping on the beach capture the action of life in simple, vivid rituals.

Like her, lots of artists in the show are on the league faculty. Many teach art, study art and juggle art with other careers, including McNear, who develops websites through his business *Plasterdog.com*.

"My business partner is an Englishman who has an interesting hobby — he collects plaster dogs," says McNear. The company name stands out with its strong, direct imagery, something McNear brings as well to his fine-art pursuit of linoleum block printmaking. He carves images with mythical themes and bold, exotic silhouettes into the blocks.

"I'm inspired by mythology," he says. But he's also inspired by African, Pre-Columbian and South Asian art, which he first encountered in his grandfather's home. "He was an art speculator and studied art in Paris in the 1920s and 1930s. There was an explosion of Third World art then," says McNear.

His grandfather travelled extensively but lived nearby and bought and sold a stream of works while McNear was growing up in Evanston. "This floating museum shaped how I look at things," McNear notes. His figures often fuse a classical demeanor with a powerful, ethnic energy. The mythical Prometheus is often depicted in torment as an eagle eternally devours his liver, the Titan's punishment for stealing fire from the gods for humans. But McNear's Prometheus captures the birds meant to torture him, a vision of hope amidst pain. The allure of the black sheath dress and of the goddess combine forces in a block print of three women. And animals inhabit other prints as a bestiary of free spirits.

The linoleum block printmaking process enhances McNear's bursts of line and color. "Designs are drawn in reverse directly on the block and then cut out using knives or gouges,"

he notes. "The finished block is then inked, paper is put on top of the block, and the image is transferred to the paper." Artists including Picasso and Matisse quickly picked up on the print potential of linoleum, first introduced for floors in the late 1800s. McNear applies the vintage technique to create a completely contemporary look.

McCarthy goes for timeless moods instead. "I love to paint Midwest landscapes," she says, weaving impressionistic serenity into oil paintings of Wilmette Harbor, North Shore beaches and various panoramas of the seasons. The places in her works are often unspecified but feel achingly familiar.

"When I look at a landscape, I think about what kind of painting it would make," she says. And for all the atmospheric beauty of the scenes, McCarthy's college studies of botany and geology give a natural and definitive context to the color of stone and the shapes of trees.

McCarthy grew up in Michigan but has lived in Wilmette for 25 years. She's taken art classes since childhood, and while she exhibits widely and has work in many private collections, she still likes the social milieu of studio classes.

"Art is an isolating thing to do and taking classes means you see people and they see things in your art that you don't," she says.

What might you see? The league show is the place to find an artist or find the artist in yourself.

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The North Shore Art League's 87th Annual Members Art Show 2011, Sept. 9-17, Winnetka Community House, 620 Lincoln Ave., Winnetka. The show opens with an artist's reception, preview party and silent auction, 6:30-9:30 p.m., Sept. 9. The party's Art in Bloom extravaganza pairs selected works of art with floral interpretations by renowned garden-club arrangers and florists. A light supper and open bar are included in the ticket price — \$70 at the door. Sept. 10-17: the show and sale are free. Call 847-446-2870 or visit <http://www.northshoreartleague.org/index.html>. Attend Nancy Behles' *Ladies Night Out! At Ease at the Easel*, a painting workshop Oct. 18. All supplies are included in the fee and even beginners leave with a finished canvas. Visit <http://www.northshoreartleague.org/whichsemester.html> for more classes and workshops.