



Herbal Tea with an Artist: An Interview with Johanna Mueller

By Megan Garn

An Interview with Johanna Mueller at Cranford's Tea Tavern.

Johanna Mueller, a local printmaking artist and a printmaking instructor at Aims Community College will present her exhibit “Paths and Passage” at the Tointon Gallery, 651 10th Ave., and will be on display Friday, March 22 through Saturday, April 27. “Paths and Passage,” features Johanna Mueller’s detailed animal imagery, created by her use of various printmaking and mixed media techniques.

The opening artist reception of Johanna’s exhibit is scheduled for Friday, March 22 from 5 to 7 p.m. The reception includes an artist talk by Johanna and light refreshments. Admission to the gallery is free and visitors may view the exhibit when the Tointon Gallery is open. The gallery is open Monday through Saturday, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. and during many of the performances at the Union Colony Civic Center.

The Tointon Gallery presents over ten shows annually to provide enjoyment, education and to encourage dialogue around art. To learn more about Greeley’s public gallery, please visit greeleyart.com or contact Kari Tamblyn at kari.tamblyn@greeleygov.com.

Megan, the Public Art Marketing Coordinator sat down with Johanna at the Cranford’s Tea Tavern in Greeley on a Tuesday afternoon, March 6th 2019 to discuss her artwork and her process as an artist. See the details of her interview below:



One of Johanna's in progress block printmaking woodblock plates.

Process seems to be important to you as an artist. Why have you chosen printmaking as your main medium choice for your art illustrations?

I fell in love with printmaking at the tail end of undergrad, and I just fell into the class, I didn’t know exactly what it was. I’d seen prints before and I loved them, but the titles didn’t mean anything to me. Where it would say intaglio or block print, I just thought they all looked somewhat like a drawing and somewhat like a painting, but totally different. – *There are several different printmaking processes, but essentially a print is created through contact with an inked or un-inked plate, stone, block or screen.* – So I was intrigued by the medium and the graphic qualities of the line. In my first

printmaking class I really fell in love with the process because you take this blank plate and you have to work with the entire surface of it and then put the ink on it and put it on a blank piece of paper and magically it becomes a piece of art. I fell in love with the process and all of the attention to detail these plates required. – *Printmaking plates can be wood, metal or a plastic surfaces.* – I’ve always loved miniature and very small little worlds, like looking through a keyhole and that’s what these pieces evoke

to me. Printmaking also has a relationship with literature. The process that I do is called relief engraving and that's the same process that would have been done on end-grain wood blocks and then prepared with lead type for book illustrations. So it has a built in narrative quality to it which I really enjoy because a lot of my pieces also tell stories and I have many animal characters in my work so for me it was a really great connection.



Detail of traditional print illustration and the reusable printmaking plate.

Your artwork is very detailed, I imagine it takes quite a bit of time to create. What is your process and how much time do you spend creating a piece of art?

Each individual plate is quite time consuming to create, however I am able to reuse plates that I have made and most of my pieces of work are really layered and really colorful and add it different pieces of paper. My pieces involve multiple prints with the same plate, which makes up a larger piece of work. I'm just using little bits of prints, but with an addition, all of them are all the same, if there are a hundred of these prints, all of them should look identical to each other. And if the additions strays at all, then it's not a part of the same addition, so these prints become their own unique piece and they're much more mixed-media and collage. Using all these different parts and pieces that I create with different plates makes a piece much more interesting and intriguing and causes the viewer to stay longer. Some pieces have over 25 different printed elements, but they are all combined to make one piece. So I'm getting a little bit more bang for my buck with the blocks after the additions are carved, I can use this plate to talk to another plate and make a whole different conversation happen. Some of my pieces of artwork are more traditional, with just one print and others are more modern, with lots of prints and more collage-like elements. I will hand draw on the more modern pieces or paint on them with various mediums such as India ink, colored pencils or acrylic paint. This adds depth to a piece and helps pop some of the edges of the prints. When you look at a piece you can kind of tell where the paper line is, where the white paper ends and where the print on Japanese paper begins. All the prints are printed on Japanese paper which is really thin and translucent which you can see through some of these darker layers, it is a nice creamy color. So the pieces can get really intensely detailed. It really brings people in and it makes them stay in the piece a lot longer because they want to figure out the details of the animals.



Detail of traditional print illustration.

Animal imagery and storytelling seems to be a key component to your work. What inspires each of your art pieces? Do you have a specific story you are attempting to portray?

I like to think that I bring people half-way in the work, in that I have a story to be told, and I want the mood and the overall sentiment of the piece to come across, but I want the audience to be able to bring their own experience into the piece. I don't want to give them everything about the piece. However, some people hit it on the nose every time. I'm always surprised, but because a lot of these pieces do deal with shared experiences that we all have as humans, like figuring out who you are inside and dealing with intuition and the pieces are about the human

experience. For me personally, a lot of my work has to deal directly with the struggle of being an artist, but people often read that as a normal struggle that's happening in their own life. As for the animal imagery, I like to use a lot of animals from North America, so mountain animals, bears, foxes, coyotes, wolves or dogs, antelope, prong-horned deer and elk. Since those are the ones I see the most, these are the animals that resonate with me most. I've lived up in the mountains before, in Snowmass, Colorado for a while and I saw bears all the time, deer and all these animals. It was cool to live in proximity to them. Also looking at the folk tales and indigenous tales, that involved those animals, I'm able to bring out that meaning. But then sometimes also changing it slightly so people have to think a little bit harder about what an animal represents. For me, I've used wolves and dogs and coyotes as stand-ins for the human at times because we read canines so well. If you have a dog you can tell exactly what their mood is. So they aren't always a fearful creature or a trickster like a coyote or a fox. The overall takeaway is that I want people to see something in a piece from their own experience.



Johanna Mueller, Artist and Instructor at Aims Community College.

Looking at your portfolio, it looks like you've recently introduced color into your art illustrations. What inspired this change?

It relates back to the process and the editions, you have one plate and you're able to make a finite amount of art with it. When I first started, I fell in love with the black and white block print, but eventually I felt like it was the equivalent of staying in a cubicle. I could do that and I could do it well, but I wanted to exercise my creativity a little bit more so I started experimenting using color and using it with multiple block prints. A lot of my colors are inspired by place. So when I was spending a lot of time in the mountains I was using a lot of these icy blues and then after spending time in Texas, I was using a lot of succulents in my work and I was using more oranges and reds. And then through traveling, I went to Mexico, Thailand and India. I love all those bright and rich pigments. Some of those colors and references do get in my work as well. My work has a global feel to them. People often comment on her pieces saying that it feels like Mexican folk art or it feels East Indian. There's all of that happening in my pieces of work. Animals are also really fun because they do exist on all of these other continents. So they're not just familiar to one experience. It's all interconnected.

