Wild at Art

By Julie Hammonds

"Barn Owl" by Leigh Parkin

Two bobcats are resting in the shade beneath a rocky overhang. One cat sleeps deeply, head on the other's flank, black-tipped tail draped across the rock. The second cat, its tufted ears pricked and eyes half-open, drowsily watches a cluster of humans who are staring at him, intent on recording every detail of his movements, attitude and appearance.

In any other situation, the humans' proximity would make this shy cat nervous. But this is the bobcat enclosure at the Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum. Such scenes happen here every day — with one difference. Unlike most museum visitors, the people along the fence are not carrying digital cameras. These are art students, and they are employing that most old-fashioned of tools: the pencil.

What are artists doing walking the trails of the Desert Museum, sketchpads and pencils at the ready? According to Susan Fisher, who directs the Art Institute at the Desert Museum, they are learning to conserve the plants and animals of the Sonoran Desert and developing a deeper understanding of the region — through art.

Some students take only a class or two through the Art Institute. They might capture the colors of a hummingbird in watercolor, paint the prickly grandeur of saguaros or learn secrets for sketching a swiftly moving ringtail as it explores the branches of a paloverde. Other students immerse themselves more fully in the artistic experience, taking class after class. For these people, the Art Institute offers a special program ideally suited to their passion and level of commitment to nature and art. It is the certificate in nature illustration.

Medieval to Modern

The certificate program is a rigorous course of study for those who want to achieve a high level of technical skill at depicting the plants and animals of the Sonoran Desert.

Twelve required courses form the program's core curriculum. These deliver fundamental lessons in drawing, color mixing, composition, perspective and the use of various media (including pencil, watercolor, colored pencil and pen and ink). Students also take a class in botany or anatomy, depending on whether they wish to develop a deeper understanding of plants (known in the art world as "botanicals") or animals. An additional 100 hours of elective courses also are required, as is a final portfolio review.

The systematic study of art has its roots in the Middle Ages. "This certificate program was developed from a similar program I created in Colorado in botanical illustration," says Fisher. "When I was putting that program together, I was thinking of medieval guilds. The guilds took on apprentices and taught them every phase of the art-making process. They learned how to make their own paints — we teach a color-mixing class. They took time to understand the structure of a painting — we offer a composition class."

"Coryphantha Robustispina" by Joan McGann

The comparisons don't stop there. "We are seeing a return to the more classical methods of study as they relate to realistic art," Fisher says. "Our students want to draw a bird or a coati so it looks real: This program takes them logically through the steps that achieve this goal. The portfolio review at the end of our program is reminiscent of the one artwork that aspiring guild apprentices were required to paint for the master artist under whose tutelage they remained until their work met with his approval. That's where we get the word 'masterpiece.'"

Six people have completed their masterpieces and earned certificates in nature illustration since the first one was awarded in 2007. Their level of achievement is impressive. At a 2008 student art show in the Desert Museum's Ironwood Gallery, artwork displayed by students collected rave reviews from the public for realism and heart. Two recent graduates showed work in the 11th Annual International Juried Botanical Art Exhibition in New York City, proof that art created in Arizona is ready for national exposure.

One of these 2008 graduates was Joan McGann of Tucson. Earning a certificate has reintroduced McGann to an activity she loves. "I have a BFA [a bachelor's degree in fine arts] in Printmaking and Drawing, but it's been many years since I drew seriously," she says. "I moved here from Kansas in 1980 and love the desert environment. I have learned so much about the plants I've drawn, from cactus and succulents to grasses and wildflowers. I have also

enjoyed drawing butterflies and birds."

McGann's art has been exhibited around the country since she completed the certificate. Now a member of the American Society of Botanical Artists, the Guild of Natural Science Illustrators and the Colored Pencil Society of America, she has gained a creative outlet and a profound sense of satisfaction from re-entering the art world. "I've sold a few pieces and been commissioned for others. The process has been exceptionally satisfying and valuable to me."

"Rabbit Skull" by Eric Curtis

It Starts With a Single Step

Some people might find the thought of taking 12 required courses plus 100 hours of electives intimidating, to say the least.

For such people, it's reassuring to know that students don't have to commit to earning a certificate. The Art Institute is not like a university, where a full courseload is standard practice, competition for grades is intense and dropping out is frowned upon. It welcomes people to take one class at a time. But many students who take one or two classes keep coming back for more, eventually finding themselves so close to completing a certificate that they just go ahead and finish.

That's how it worked for Leigh Parkin of Tucson. "My mother was an artist, but I had never done art until three, four years ago when a girlfriend said, 'Let's go out to the Desert Museum and take a class.' So we started with drawing, and pen and ink." Parkin completed her certificate in 2008. She now runs her own business, Lost Mesa Studios, and is co-founder and co-president of the Starr Pass Art League.

"I began taking classes as an intellectual exercise to help me focus on visual details," says Eric Curtis. A dentist practicing in Safford, Ariz., Curtis writes about medical topics. He took that first art class to find out how to bring realistic details into his writing. The process of pursuing a certificate has expanded his horizons. "While I am not planning to quit my day job," he says, "I have already published a few drawings and paintings in several professional journals and may get to do some dental textbook illustrations."

Conservation Through Art

In the context of the Desert Museum, to which most visitors come to view a wide-ranging collection of plants and animals of the Sonoran Desert, pursuit of an art certificate may seem out of place. Not so, says Curtis. "Besides providing the most stunning campus setting imaginable, the Art Institute has produced a thoughtful, well-balanced curriculum of classes that not only have increased my skills in manipulating images in creative ways, but have also sharpened my ability to closely, carefully observe the world around me."

Observing the world is a key component of the art curriculum. "Drawing images is different than taking photographs," says Fisher. "Drawings can focus on parts and details. They can include a greater variety of information than a photograph: They help people compare across species (beaks, feet, tails) or show a blossom from bud to fruit in the same image. Art makes it easier for people to learn about their subjects and at the same time it inspires them to want to know more."

Student Muriel Timmins agrees. She took an animal sketching class in 2008 (see sidebar at right). "Perhaps the best thing I came away with was the importance of patient observation, including the careful measuring of proportions and the alignment of limbs and facial features — all of which help bring your drawing to life," she explains. "And the Desert Museum is a great place to do that observing. Watching an animal as it goes about the business of living reveals not only the beauty and grace of its body in movement, but also its individual personality."

Art forges a personal connection between artist and subject. Says Fisher, "When you're done with a drawing, it's

At an Animal Sketching Class

Ten students cluster around the table where our teacher, Catherine Nash, sits with a graphite pencil in hand. In front of us, a captive ringtail is exploring the branches of a fake tree.

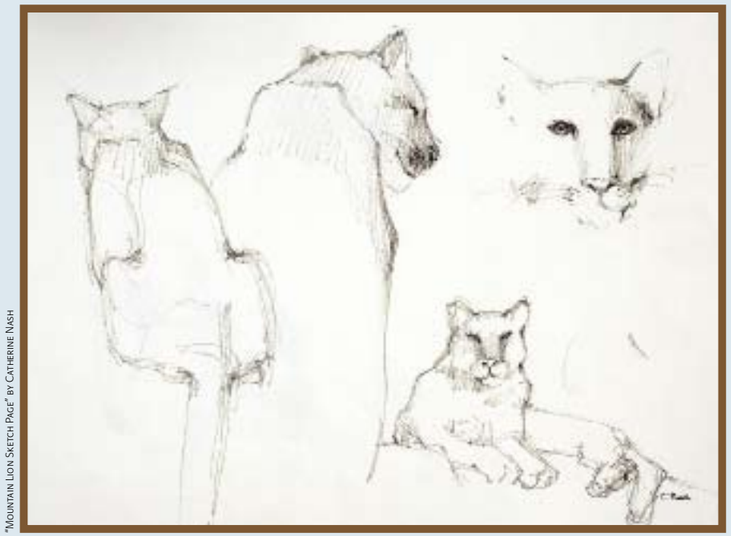
What's the hardest thing about sketching animals? The ringtail demonstrates one answer: This creature is in perpetual motion. Nash talks us through her process. "I'm just looking for overall shapes and dimensions right now," she says. Her hand starts to move across the paper's surface. "I'm trying to get a feel for what this animal is, how it's built."

Nash's words peter out as she becomes more absorbed by the act of sketching. She warned us this would happen. As her concentration intensifies, we hear only the scratching of claws on fake tree bark. A constellation of dots appears on paper, noting the placement of eyes in relation to nose and front paws. Dots become lines, then areas of shade and light, then patterns of darker fur on the animal's masked face. Within a few moments, a lively ringtail emerges: petite body, long fluffy tail, alert ears pricked forward above large eyes. We don't mind that our teacher's voice has fallen silent – she's speaking on paper.

In 15 hours over the next three days, we start learning to do the same. We draw in the classroom and on the grounds of the Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum, filling notebooks with images of macaws and mountain lions, bobcats and barn owls, kestrels and kit foxes.

For some students, this is their first Art Institute class; for others, it fulfills requirements of the certificate in nature illustration. We are in good hands with Nash, a master artist who has shown her work across the United States, Japan and Europe.

Her first lesson: Sketching is not drawing. A sketch strives to capture something about an animal during those fleeting moments when it is present. It can be a sense of the animal's attitude, or a detail such as the shape of a paw or a nose. Whatever you capture, the point is to learn about the animal. We learn from the handlers, from the animals and (most crucially) from the act of seeing and sketching.



"Mountain Lion Sketch Page" by Catherine Nash

Drawing is an effective teacher. If you draw a wolf's paw in relation to its lower leg, and you get it wrong the first time, your eye tells you. Sketching gives the freedom to try again and again.

Nash urges us to let go of self-critical thoughts while sketching. "We're all in the same boat," she says. "We've all made duds." We laugh in agreement. She guides us to see our work as practice and progress, and take pleasure in the act of capturing a moment on paper. "It's not about the results," she says. "Let go of the product. The immediacy of your reaction to what you are seeing is how we get that record of life."

What about those extra lines, where the creature you're drawing starts out one shape and size, but ends up another? "Showing your process adds life to the work," Nash says. In this classroom, there are no wrong lines.

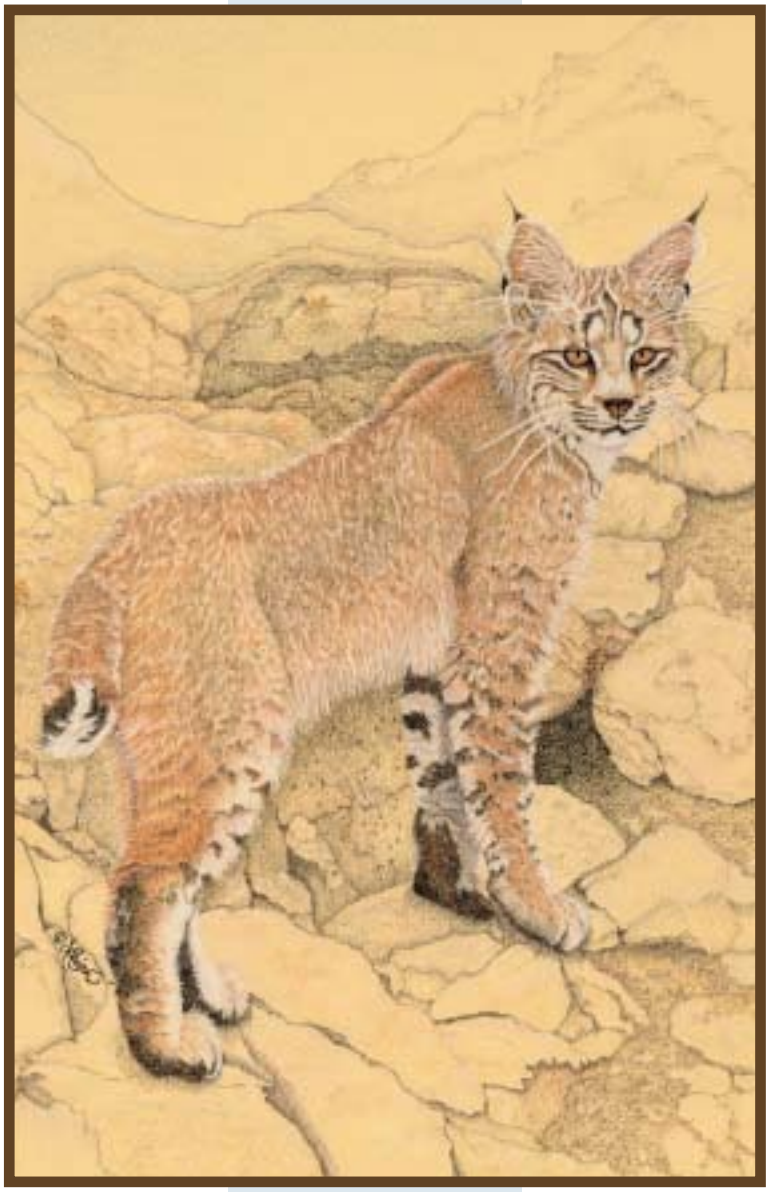
Our progress over the course of three days is evident. Every day, we lay our pages on a table and look at them as a group. We find many things to praise in each other's sketches – good practice for seeing our own work fairly.

"Relaxation and connection," says Nash. "Those are the gifts of sketching."

–Julie Hammonds

yours. The subject is yours — you own it — you feel responsible for it, and thus are more likely to respond to conservation needs. It has a greater impact on you because you have drawn it."

The deep purpose to all this creative effort is summed up in the Art Institute's motto, "conservation through art education." It comes from a belief that, "The creation of natural history art leads to a desire to understand and preserve the natural world in both artist and viewer."



"First Visit" by Leigh Parkin

A Community of Artists

The unique environment of the Desert Museum, which invites visitors to see and learn about the plants and animals of the Sonoran Desert in a whole new way, is just one lure that pulls many people through the doors of the Art Institute and past the fear of trying something new.

Another thing that attracts students is the quality of the Art Institute's faculty. Teachers in residence include well-known wildlife artists such as John Serry-Lester and Joe Garcia; wildlife illustrators such as Adele Earnshaw; and scientific illustrators, including Linda Feltner, a former professor of scientific illustration at the University of Washington. Visits from internationally acclaimed artists offer additional inspiration.

While the Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum's fascinating environment and a top-notch faculty are powerful magnets, the attractive force that keeps students coming back to Art Institute classes until they earn a certificate is the classroom environment. It's designed to encourage experimentation, fostering the kind of learning that occurs when a student feels the freedom to try something new.

Going into that first art class, a student might fear failure: not being as good as other students, not having the creativity and vision to be a "real" artist, or lacking the physical skills or aptitude to do art. Teachers at the Art Institute strive to make the classroom a comfortable place where everyone feels safe to explore the possibilities of art.

"Art is a language we all speak," says Fisher, the Art Institute's director. In other words, learning to make art is a process in which everyone can take part. From their very first class, students are welcomed into an appreciative community of artists who enjoy the process of art-making as much as any result. Working your way up to a certificate in nature illustration is not an end to the process; rather, it's a structured beginning to a lifetime of making nature-based art.

Fisher exemplifies this attitude. "To produce a perfect picture is not the goal," she says. "The goal is, if they look long enough to draw, they will connect with the Sonoran Desert in a more direct way than through other means. This program is different because students spend time really looking at the animals. That eye-hand connection makes a tremendous difference. This program is a profound way to connect people to the wildlife of the Sonoran Desert."

▪ When not losing all track of time while sketching, Julie Hammonds is the associate editor of Arizona Wildlife Views magazine.