

SARAH MCRAE MORTON
MAPPING STARS AT NOON

DECEMBER 2016

FOSTER/WHITE GALLERY





The Unsung Heroes, oil on canvas, 23.5 X 31.5 inches. Cover page: *Mapping Stars at Noon*, oil on canvas, 76 X 52 inches.

SARAH McRAE MORTON

Mapping Stars at Noon

The work in *Mapping Stars at Noon*, makes constellations of the flickering worlds of the past, spinning thread between recorded history and family lore, mythology and the natural world.

My great-great-great-great-grandmother, an English settler named Margaret, was westward bound from Virginia in 1779 seeking land for a homestead when her traveling party was ambushed by a group of Shawnee Indians in Ohio. She was taken captive and for five years lived with the family of the chief. She had a son named John while living among the Shawnee, and when she was ransomed back to English society of Virginia, her son went with her. He wasn't at home there, and as a teenager he fled to the wilderness of the West. As a hunter and fur trader along the Missouri River, he revisited his childhood ways of living on the land, but it was a short-lived dream. He was murdered in the Yellowstone region in his early twenties, likely by a band of people who thought he didn't belong where he was. All that is known of him is what his mother recorded before her death, hoping that he would live on in the memory of her descendents.

I have tried to imagine the wilderness that felt like home to John, and the desperation or spirit of adventure that lured him to the Northwest. He coursed the Missouri River a few years before Lewis and Clark mapped their route woven along ancient trails and committed to their journals descriptions of the flora and fauna that were already lifeblood and pith for people.

My sister, a writer, photographer, and adventurer lives in Montana not far from the grove of Cedar trees in Idaho where the field notes and journals of Lewis and Clark were edited by Bernard Devoto. I traveled there this winter to explore the region, wanting to gather impressions of the landscape and throw a handful of wildflowers along the river where John Paulee could have died.

It was in a bookshop in a small Montana town where my curiosity was spurred- from the crown of a stack of books in an antique shop, the beaming Evelyn Cameron caught my eye. Her pose, standing atop her horse was familiar. I had never seen her work, but I have painted several versions of my sister and myself standing in this pose on the back of our childhood pony. Evelyn Cameron's photographs of the Northwest in the 1900s, her diary entries, and her husband's devotion to the birds of Montana as an ornithologist have captivated me and shaped the paintings of Mapping Stars at Noon. The blurred passages in



my work refer to the dragged light on a glass plate negative, the result of a slow shutter and impatient wolf. That streak may have rendered the photograph imperfect in Evelyn Cameron's eyes, but to me dates the picture and reminds me that her work captured the living and moving. She captured what unfolded in the Montana landscape exactly one hundred years after The Corps of Discovery passed through, as steam powered tractors were beginning to comb the matted roots of the prairie.

The journals of Lewis and Clark have also influenced my work, helping me piece together and visualize the world of John Paulee. Toussaint Charbonneau, the husband of Sacagawea could have known John as he was also a fur trader in that time and place. Sacagawea's son Jean Baptiste Charbonneau, the swaddled child on the dollar coin whose birth was hastened by tea of rattlesnake tail, may have known what it was like to be torn between two worlds. In one painting of this series Jean Baptiste is pictured in the opulent room of the palace of the Duke of Wurttemberg, in Germany. He spent six years there as a young man studying with the nobleman, Friedrich Paul Wilhelm von Wurttemberg, who was an explorer and naturalist. When I first moved to Germany six years ago, it was to this region. The painting was done with some familiarity of the same old Roman Roads winding through the Black Forests that Jean Baptiste would have walked along 200 years prior.

A theme running through out the work is displacement. At first sight, it is puzzling that

Sacajawea's son would be in a German palace. It is alarming that a whale would be strewn on a mountain slope, or slumped across the top of a locomotive. There are parakeets in ice spangled chestnuts, and jesses in the nests of hawks, white bears in cultivated landscapes, a girl standing on the back of a grizzly, and vignettes of forests and seascapes on a theatre stage.

The mid 19th century painters Millet and Courbet used tricks of geometry to buck their subjects from the ground plain of their compositions. By distorting the perspective of the scene they conveyed the disharmony of their subjects' lives. I have borrowed such pictorial devices in this series of paintings and have looked to paintings from around the time of John Paulee's life to help tell a story: 'Fur Traders Descending the Missouri,' by George Caleb Bingham, 'The Peaceable Kingdom,' by Edward Hicks, and 'The Artist in His Museum,' by Charles Wilson Peale, to name a few. I have drawn on history- the painted, the written, the told around campfires to compose these paintings, but the paintings are also my diary entries. They are records of my observations of the world around me. While I was working on the painting of Sacagawea as she beheld the "Monstrous Fish" as she called it, 13 Sperm Whales washed up on the beaches of the North Sea in Germany. It is the kind of solemn, but serendipitous occurrence that tells me to keep following the wind of curiosity, the trail along which I have found interconnectedness.

When my eyes are strained from looking at a fixed distance on the studio wall, I often hike with my dog to the fields on the outskirts of the city of Cologne to watch hawks. I stare into the sky and wait until I see a dash of cream and copper in my periphery. In tarnished gray months, the flash of green of the feral parakeets conducts my eye. A few of the birds escaped from a zoo in the early 1900's and they thrive now along the Rhine River. The parakeets are dazzling, but hawks are what I like to watch sail and hunt. The best time is during hay harvesting season, when the birds will perch on the giant spools out in the open fields. The painting, 'Hawk Watching, Sword, Stone, Bone,' is a painting as much about where I am from as where I am. There is a long history of painting the stacks of hay- from Claude Monet to the Wyeths of my native Pennsylvania. The shift of shapes with the evolution of the bailer, like the blur on Evelyn Cameron's glass plate negatives, marks a certain time and place.

In drafting my paintings, I often think of the quote by William Faulkner "The past is never dead. It's not even past."



The Hull of the Annabele Lee, oil on canvas, 24 X 52 inches

Previous page: *The Blind Beekeeper's Watch*, oil on canvas, 47.25 x 31.5 inches



*“Bavo is the
patron saint
of Falconry.*

*Traces are
the weak light
bands on a
feather as a
consequence
of a period of
hunger
or stress.”*

*The Traces of
Saint Bavo's
Decoy and the
Pony Hubert,
oil on canvas,
76 X 52 inches*



The Gift, oil on canvas, 76 x 96 inches

*“The style of the painting was inspired by
Thomas Chimes’ (1921- 2009, Pennsylvania)
white paintings which were etherial portraits of his heroes.”*

“The painting was also inspired by Robinson Jeffers’ poem ‘Original Sin.’”



The Carousel, oil on canvas, 23.5 x 31.5 inches

*“An imagined scene in the **palace** of the explorer,
and naturalist
who discovered the sources of the **Missouri River**,
Paul Wilhelm Duke of Wurttemberg”*

“Designed to create the illusion of a spiral if you stare at it, the red flower at the bottom right is a clue as to where to start looking at the painting.”



A Bed of Chestnut Bough, oil on canvas, 31.5 x 23.5 inches



“Painted after searching the
tangled overgrowth
 at the **mouth of an abandoned**
coal mine for traces of my family’s
 past in Appalachia.

It was a spring day and it was
snowing confetti flakes.
 It was told to me that my grandfather
 was born during
a devastating flood
 in the hollow of the mountains;
 his father grabbed a holly tree
 out of the swelling river
 and replanted it on the banks to
 commemorate the birth of his son.
I found the river,
 which flooded again this year,
 and sprigs of holly by the hundreds.”

“The maypole reference and streamers
 in the trees are a nod to
Andrew Wyeth’s “Snow Hill,”
 1989, of a maypole celebration
 of a snow blanketed day
 in my native Pennsylvania”



Young Ghosts Looking for Holly Among Bramble
 and Vine, oil on canvas, 23.5 x 23.5 inches

A Picket Fence of Broken Maypoles and the
 Everblooming Rose, oil on canvas,
 23.5 X 23.5 inches



Atlas Found, oil on canvas, 34 X 52 inches

*“In January 1806, the Lewis and Clark expedition heard
news of a whale
carcass washed up south of Fort Clatsop.
Sacajawea insisted on seeing the carcass,
arguing that “she had traveled a long way with us to see the great waters, and
that now that **monstrous fish** was also to be seen,
she thought it very hard she could not be permitted to see either.”
(Merriwether Lewis, January 6, 1806)*



A Wolf Had Not Been Seen in Two Hundred Years, oil on canvas, 31.5 X 47.25 inches

*“**T**he title is a reference to the painting by Howard Pyle*

“A Wolf Had Not Been Seen in Salem for Thirty Years,” 1909.

*The mount of a **Woodland Caribou** on the man’s back was painted after reading about the dwindling last herd in the US.*

The chair carried by the boy refers to

Goya’s 26th Capricho, 1797-98, “They Already Have a Seat.”

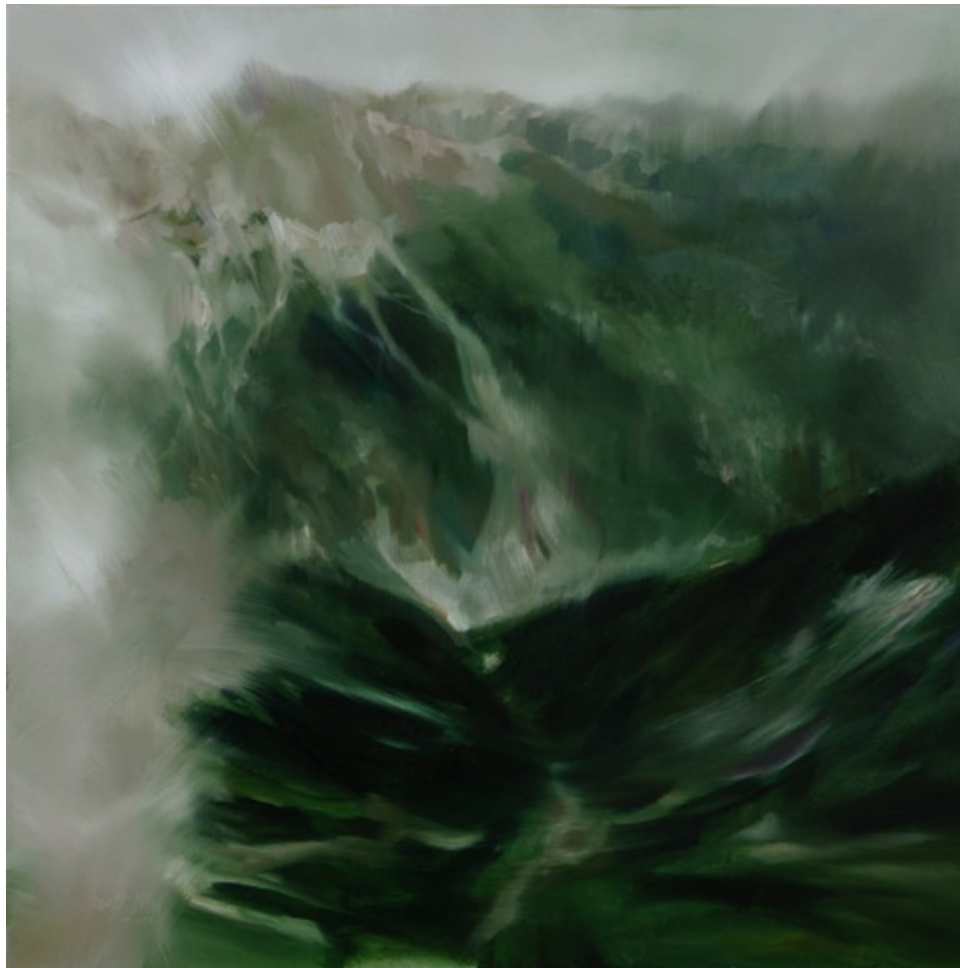


Macular Degeneration, oil on canvas, 23.5 X 23.5 inches

*“The title refers to a disease of the eye resulting in a blind spot obscuring the focal point.
Photo Source: Mary Caperton Morton, my sister. Taken with permission at a Taos Pueblo Pow Wow.”*



*“Before and after’ view of
a mountain range changing
from icy blue white to
hauntingly green.”*



*Lost But Found, oil on canvas, 23.5 X 23.5 inches
Emerald Spell, oil on canvas, 23.5 x 23.5 inches*



*“Painted on
the day that
seven species
of bees were
added to the
endangered
species list”*

*“My great
grandfather-in-
law was a
blind
beekeeper”*

*“The table
scenes refer to
sacred places.”*

*The Blind
Beekeeper's Watch
oil on canvas
47.25 x 31.5 inches*



The Circus Animals' Desertion, oil on canvas, 23.5 X 31.5 inches

*“Titled after the poem by William Butler Yeats.
Figures are references to “The Skater” by Gilbert Stuart
and “The Skating Minister” by Henry Raeburn.
In my original composition the central figure was standing on a ladder,
and a bear was tethered to the boat.”*



The Eyrie of March, oil on canvas, 76 x 74 inches

*“An eyrie is the nest of a bird of prey. The painting is the size of the **nest of a bald eagle** but is composed of blooming and wilting tangles of plants.*

*Some plants were painted from the descriptions of **newly discovered plants** in the journals of **Lewis and Clark**, and some were gathered on a day I was out hawking. Others were from a bag of stem and bloom waste from the florist shop down the street from my studio.”*



The Impossible Hunt, oil on canvas, 76 x 74 inches

“Based on Edward Hicks’ (1780-1849, Pennsylvania) 62 paintings titled *The Peaceable Kingdom*.

*I removed all of the humans in this scene. **All of the animals** were painted from collections in cabinets of curiosity and dioramas in natural history museums. It is an impossible scene, anatomically and spatially. The configuration of the animals is bizarre as is the case in Hicks’ paintings.”*



The Last Green Bear, oil on canvas, 23.5 x 31.5 inches

“Figures from “The Cust Brothers” by John Hoppner, 1795.

Inspired by the painting “Man Proposes, God Disposes”

by Edwin Henry Landseer in 1864, believed to be about Franklins Lost Expedition.

*Two ships, the H.M.S. Erebus and H.M.S. Terror that were **lost in the Arctic** while seeking the Northwest Passage. They were last seen by a whaling ship in Lancaster Sound in 1845.*

The wreckage of the H.M.S. Terror was finally discovered this summer.”



The Lover's Eye, oil on canvas, 23.5 x 23.5 inches

*“Refers to a **Georgian** practice of wearing a miniature **painting of a lover’s eye**,
the rest of the face omitted to protect the lover’s identity.*

*The **dog** on her shoulder
is a **symbol of fidelity**.”*



The Monster's of the Sleep of Reason, oil on canvas, 23.5 x 23.5 inches

*“Titled after Goya’s 43rd Capricho, 1798.
The **turtle** on his shoulder means “Hurry Slowly.”
Hint: the hunter is the monster.”*



The Rosy Wealth of May, oil on canvas, 23.5 x 23.5 inches

“Based on *“Fur Traders Descending the Missouri,”* 1845 by George Caleb Bingham which was originally titled *“Half Breed Son”* referring to the **children of French Fur Trappers and Native American Women.**

The girl on the boat protecting the buffalo from the viewer is an imagined painting of the

daughter of Sacajawea and Toussaint Charbonneau, whose short life and death remains a mystery.

George Caleb Bingham (1811-1879) moved from the US to Dusseldorf (neighboring city to Cologne)Germany in 1856.”



*The Rush to
Unlooked-for Sights*
oil on canvas
76 x 52 inches



The Wake of a Whale, oil on canvas, 23.75 x 31.5 inches

“Train Source: Strasburg Railroad Museum, a stone throw from my studio in rural Pennsylvania.

Inspiration: the display of dead whales on trains

*to promote the **whaling industry after WWII***

*and their later use by **circus showmen** for the sake of spectacle.*

The whales traveled for years throughout Europe,

in various states of decay and embalmment,

some with their insides scooped out and turned into walk through nature exhibits.”



*“Titled after
the poem **“Rock
and Hawk”** by
Robinson Jeffers
in 1935.*

*Inspired by a
photograph by
Mary Caperton
Morton of Seal
Rock, OR.”*

*To Hang in the
Future Sky,
oil on canvas,
47.25 x 31.5 inches*



“The desk on the horse was inspired by a passage in the Lewis & Clark journals. This is an imagined scene in the palace of the Duke of Wurttemberg, the residence where Jean Baptiste Charbonneau, Sacajawea’s son, lived for 6 years in Germany.

It is in the region where I first lived when I moved to Germany.”

The Tower to the Cusp of Curiosity of Charbonneau, oil on canvas, 47.25 X 31.5 inches

SARAH MCRAE MORTON

Education

2008 Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture
2007 Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Certificate Program
2004-07 University of Pennsylvania, Undergraduate Courses
2006 Trinity College, Rome, chemistry course in cooperation with ICCROM and the Vatican Museum Laboratory

Selected Exhibitions

2016 'Mapping Stars at Noon,' Foster White Gallery, Seattle, WA
2016 'The Dandelion Grower,' Red Raven Art Company, Lancaster, PA
2016 Solo Show, Doris Ulmann Gallery at Berea College, Berea, KY
2015 Solo Show, Dowling Walsh Gallery, Rockland, ME
2015 'Painting on Horseback,' Red Raven Art Company, Lancaster, PA
2014 'The Impossible Sight of a Ship,' Solo Show, Dowling Walsh Gallery, Rockland, ME
2012-15 Annual Solo Show, Red Raven Art Company, Lancaster, PA
2007-10 Annual Solo Show, Red Raven Art Company, Lancaster, PA
2011 'Promises of Greatness,' Philadelphia Sketch Club invitational
2011 Galerie Schindel, Freiburg, Germany
2011 'Pennsylvania Seen,' Lancaster Museum of Art invitational, Lancaster, PA
2009 Demuth Museum Invitational, Lancaster, PA
2009 'Forging Ahead,' Solo Show, The Mitchell School of Fine Art, Baltimore, MD
2008 'Best of All Colors,' Solo Show, Phillips Museum, Franklin and Marshall College, Lancaster, PA
2008 'Yesterday and Today,' Sande Webster Gallery, Philadelphia, PA
2006-07 Annual Juried Student Exhibition, The Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia, PA
2005-06 The Pennsylvania Academy of Music, Solo Show, Lancaster, PA

Residencies and Awards

2013 Vermont Studio Center full merit fellowship for a residency at the Vermont Studio Center
2008 The Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture
2007 Philadelphia Mayors Award
2006 Travel Scholarship from the Women's Board of The Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts
2002-03 Barnstone Studios, Coplay, PA made possible by a Matisse Foundation Fellowship

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