

# CHICAGO ARTISAN: Susan Hall

The fine artist paints the sorts of ethereal creatures you might recall from your dreams

BY PAMELA DITTMER MCKUEN



Susan Hall says she paints like a printmaker. By that, she refers to her limited color palettes, reductive backgrounds and affinity for pattern. Her subject matter is efficient, usually contemplative female figures or peaceful forest denizens, one or two at a time. The thin glazes she applies over textured backgrounds like lace and woodgrain result in ethereal, soft-focus compositions.

One viewer described a Hall painting as trying to remember a dream when you wake up.

“When painting a human figure, I keep the subject somewhat vague, so that viewers are better able to bring their own history to the work,” says Hall, who uses friends and family members as models. “When I paint an animal, however, I strive to convey its individuality—its essence. My hope is that the viewer will relate to the animal as a fellow being with whom we share this delicate planet.”

Hall grew up in Ann Arbor, Michigan, in a family of eight children, including a fraternal twin sister. Her father worked for Ford Motor Company, and her mother was an artist and potter.

“We always had art supplies out, and we were always making stuff,” she says. “That’s how we entertained ourselves.”

## Artistic Ventures

A creative streak runs throughout the family. One sister is a fashion designer, and a brother is a children’s book author. Throughout high school, Hall continued to draw and paint. She attended Connecticut College in New London, where she graduated with a bachelor of arts degree with a major in art and minor in zoology. Her original intent was a “practical” career in animal sciences, but her passion for art won out. She earned a master of fine arts degree in painting and printmaking from the University of Georgia in Athens.

She began showing and selling her art while supplementing her income by working in retail visual merchandising. It was a fun job that entailed “making a lot of things,” as

she describes it, like backdrops for window displays and wrapping tons of fake holiday gifts.

A few years later, she and her twin, who had been living in Boston, moved to Chicago in a return to the Midwest. Hall joined the visual merchandising staff at Lord and Taylor on Michigan Avenue, and she continued to paint. As her art practice grew and awards stacked up, she left the retail space and took intermittent jobs with a decorative painting company.

## Making Connections

A massive stenciling project for a Gold Coast mansion inspired the art she does today. Always interested in patterns and texture, she experimented with stencils as backgrounds for her own paintings. It was tedious work. One day, in search of a better way, she grabbed a lace tablecloth. After a bit of trial and error, she fell in love with the effects she could achieve.

The technique she developed entails covering a wood panel with a swath of lace or crochet, which she finds at thrift stores, estate sales, and on eBay. (Stains don’t matter.) She adheres the textile by slathering it with gesso and letting it dry for a day or two, then rips it off to reveal an imprinted surface. Depending on her intended subject matter, a few wrinkles or uneven patterning can be desirable.

“Sometimes it comes right off,” she says. “Sometimes it involves needle-nose pliers.”

She then applies glaze to see how the surface takes to color. If she doesn’t like it, she sands down the board and starts over. If she does, she proceeds. The lacy pattern shows through the glaze in a way that seems to veil the subject.

“I believe we are all connected in some mysterious way,” she says. “I see the patterns as this great tapestry connecting us all.”

“Her work feels related to art that is more



Top: Artist Susan Hall

Middle: *Chronicle*

Bottom: *Evening*

All photos by Bobby Reed





regarded as craft, but it also feels related to work that is for real,” says Tim Lowly, art professor and gallery director/curator at North Park University in Chicago and a representational painter. “She bridges the two worlds, and that is an unusual combination.”

### The Natural World Reversed

The artist’s much-lauded work has been exhibited in numerous shows and is held in private and corporate collections throughout the country. She is represented by a quartet of galleries: Lily Pad West, Milwaukee; Lily Pad Gallery, Watch Hill, Rhode Island; Edgewood Orchard Galleries, Fish Creek, Wisconsin; and Tvedten Fine Art, Harbor Springs, Michigan.

Aside from her professional undertakings, Hall, who lives in the near western suburbs with her journalist husband, Bobby Reed, and felines Archie and Hopper, has not strayed far from the zoology studies she once pursued. An avid birder and conservationist, she often frequents area parks and forests, sometimes taking photographs of the wildlife she encounters. She is working on her certification as a Master Naturalist,

a program through the University of Illinois Extension. When winter cooperates, which it did not this year, she fashions intricate snow sculptures in the park across from her home, much to the delight of neighbors and passersby.

“I have always loved her understanding and reverence for nature, which she expresses through her animals and birds,” says art consultant and abstract artist Thomas Masters. “But she does it very subtly. She just shows us that mysterious and wonderful deer standing in a clearing, and you get the message. It’s almost like she’s an environmentalist without the campaign.”

“As an artist, the emotion I’m most interested in exploring is empathy,” Hall says. “I feel the same level of empathy for animal subjects as I do for human subjects.”

It’s an emotion that her viewers are sure to experience as well. □

Top left: *Enchantment*

Top right: *Dawn*

Middle: *Autumn*

Bottom: *Aria*

