

A R I Z O N A  
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Art in the wild places: Award-winning Flagstaff artist finds beauty, and purpose, in depicting wild animals

One of Lauren Sarantopulos' most simple, yet sublime, paintings is "River Run." In it, a lone coyote is depicted in mid-stride, a swirling sense of onrushing motion showing its power and beauty, strength, and sinew. Its tail billows, its flanks flex with striated muscle, its mien remains both alert and stoic.

Look closer, peer more deeply, and you can detect the profile of a hawk detailed on the coyote's body, seamlessly melding with it, the wingspan nearly spreading to the ribs. The image suggests a commonality, an interdependence, among species and a shared habitat. The message, though rendered subtly, is clear: the environment belongs to no one — that is, everyone — and cooperation is key to sustainability.

Here, you surmise, is an artist fully at home in this milieu, her vision of nature and humanity distilled to a single image. She is both a close observer and part of the landscape herself.

It might then come as a surprise to learn that Sarantopulos is just 22, a newly minted Northern Arizona University graduate in environmental biology and wildlife ecology. Her fusion of science and art has resulted in her paintings being displayed in Phoenix and Flagstaff galleries and, this spring, having one of her more politically charged works — "Red Dawn," about fracking's effects on the endangered Gunnison sage grouse — shortlisted for a prestigious wildlife art award in the United Kingdom.

Regardless of whether Sarantopulos is selected as the David Shepherd Foundation 2020 wildlife artist of the year in the "human impact" category, her work seemingly succeeds in raising awareness for a host of environmental concerns -- which she plans to continue pursuing in her dual careers as scientist and artist.

As Jill Sans, owner of Flagstaff's HeArt Box Gallery, which has shown Sarantopulos' work, pointed out, the young painter has an artistic maturity that belies her years.

Then again, maybe not. Sarantopulos has always been something of a prodigy, painting as soon as she could hold a brush with dexterity while growing up in the wide-open spaces of northern Wyoming, in the shadow of the Bighorn National Forest. She had her first solo

show at age 13 — headline in the local paper: “Sheridan’s da Vinci” — and drew some YouTube notoriety around the same time for her proficiency at niche art of speed painting.

College did not interrupt her artistic ambitions, though many of her classmates and professors in NAU’s environmental biology department weren’t aware of her so-called other life putting acrylic on canvas. By age 20, she had both her first exhibit in Arizona and a piece displayed at Shepherd’s London gallery.

But for Sarantopulos, painting is not about awards or exhibits, though she says she’s grateful for both. It’s about the act of observing nature and depicting the ecosystem with empathy toward all of its creatures. She’s been doing it since her toddlerhood, the redheaded only child roaming her parents’ 5-acre spread with the family dogs and farm animals on the Sheridan plains, running through streams and sitting under cottonwood trees.

Her mother, Michelle, had a college degree in fine arts and passed along that artist’s eye.

“I’ve always painted,” she said, simply. “I went through many styles: pop art, abstract. But as I got older, I became very passionate about the environment, especially after I moved to Arizona (for her senior year in high school, in Prescott). But I’ve been painting wildlife in Wyoming for a long time. It’s an interesting subject to paint, there are so many types of animals.”

In fact, much of Sarantopulos’ recent paintings were influenced by her return to Wyoming in the summer while working with Yellowstone Park environmentalists. What captivates her is the ecological balance at the park, seen essentially nowhere else in the United States.

“I’m fascinated by that area because they still have the full set of animals from pre-colonization,” Sarantopulos said. “You can still see the way the animals interact ecologically -- bears, wolves, and owls. I just keep coming back to them in my work.”

Yet, as she’s become more educated, her painting has taken on a more political edge. That emphasis is evident in “Red Dawn,” a gorgeous rendering of the regal, puffed-up sage grouse next to a wolf, silhouetted by a rutilant, sun-searing sky and, looming ominously in the background, in black and white stripes perhaps suggesting an ecological prison, an oil fracking derrick.

The Gunnison sage grouse has long been endangered and its sagebrush habitat has been torn asunder by fracking. In April, the Trump administration announced plans to vastly expand drilling and fracking in southwestern Colorado, prime home to the grouse. This was no time, then, for Sarantopulos to be subtle in her painting about the potential ecological danger therein.

“When I’m painting now, it’s not just capturing the wildlife, it’s also about making people look deeper at the subject matter,” she said. “When you’re out in nature, people get so caught up

in their day-to-day lives that we don't realize the beauty around us. If I can help inspire people to look deeper at nature and see the beauty in the other lives we share this planet with.

"The piece Red Dawn is more politically charged, yes. Somebody looks at that and they know. But with a lot of my other pieces, it's not so in-your-face. You see a piece and the first thing some people might feel is, it's beautiful and moving, and look at it closer. I often hide animals inside other animals to make people look closer. That's the first emotion: they are intrigued by the piece. Often, I'll put (an artist's) statement next to it, like when I did an entire series on the Yellowstone Trophic Cascade and how important the wolves are ecological to keep the balance in the ecosystem."

The scientist in Sarantopulos comes out when asked to elaborate. She patiently explained how, in Yellowstone, the wolves keep down the elk population so that the cottonwoods aren't destroyed and beavers and fish can maintain their habitat.

It's all about connection, she said. If her art can educate, she said, so much the better.

"Art speaks across languages," she said. "That will draw people in. Then if I can add the education aspect, that's great. That's why I got a degree in environmental biology. People always ask, 'Why didn't you get a degree in fine arts?' I'm like, 'I've already got the art thing down and I needed to know more about the environment.' They go hand in hand. There's a disconnect we're getting better at now between art and science, and my goal is to try to pull the two together more."

Sans, the HeArt Box owner, and curator said Sarantopulos' paintings work because her passion for nature, political and otherwise, shines through.

"When you come from a place where you care deeply, you can pull people in and connect in a way that's not (politically) abrasive," Sans said. "You want to move them to action. By creating a beautiful piece of art about, say, wolves, that reaches people. When we had her show, it was probably one of the most well-responded to shows I've had. People connect to animals more than they sometimes do to other people. By having a painting of wolves, it pulls someone in and creates the opportunity for conversation about what this piece is really about."

Not all of Sarantopulos' work is overtly political, but the mere fact of choosing wildlife art can be construed as a political choice. By the same token, Sarantopulos lists her artistic influences as Georgia O'Keeffe and Frieda Kahlo — "finding beauty in things people don't often find beauty in," she said — and wildlife artist and conservationist Emily Lamb, Shepherd's granddaughter.

Now, Sarantopulos seems at a crossroads in her young life. She wants to paint. Has to paint. Yet, she also wants a career doing scientific fieldwork. At the end of June, she will

take a position with the USGS, studying macroinvertebrates taken from the Colorado River and Grand Canyon. He plans to bring her sketch pad and paint with her.

Long-term, however, her dream is one to which any artist-cum-environmentalist may aspire:

“My dream as a fresh graduate is working in a national park or forest with my field skills, either as a fisheries technician or bird technician in the summers. Then, in winter, find a cabin somewhere to paint and get my art out there.”