

Navigator

Culture | Lifestyle | Things to Do

Flights of Fancy

Artist JoAnna Poehlmann finds inspiration in the animal kingdom.

By LINDSEY ANDERSON

Several dozen artworks, including a few of her own, hang above a swoop-backed, powder blue Victorian settee in JoAnna Poehlmann's historic Prospect Avenue apartment.

A lifelong Milwaukeean, Poehlmann has been drawing and painting since she was 6 and enrolled at St. John Cathedral's school. "One of the sisters called my mother," she recalls, "and said 'You have an artist in the family. What are you going to do about it?'"

Poehlmann's parents started sending her to classes every Saturday morning, supporting her when her passion took her to the Layton School of Art and – briefly – to Kansas City, where she worked for Hallmark Cards after graduating. "I couldn't stand it," she says. "After six months I came back home and started working for some of the department stores here," drafting fashion drawings.

Poehlmann, now 85, still takes on the occasional commission, but her focus has long since shifted to fine art: naturalistic drawings, paintings and mixed media works. She often depicts animals, especially birds; many creations recall the illustrations of ornithological artists John James Audubon and Louis Agassiz Fuertes.

Like those artists, Poehlmann works from life whenever she can, and she doesn't shy away from death, either. "Those guys went out and shot their own subjects and taxidermied them themselves." Poehlmann says she's never considered killing or stuffing an animal herself, but she does work from taxidermied models, sometimes venturing to the Milwaukee Public Museum to draw some of the more "exotic critters" in its extensive collection.



◀ A 2005 Poehlmann work titled "Night Flight"

▼ A collection of birds, which she uses as models, from the artist's freezer



▲ Poehlmann's winged-chair assemblages adorn a wall in her studio.

She keeps taxidermy specimens in her apartment too. But their effect on her home is anything but morbid. Seen alongside artwork on her walls, they evoke the energy and endless variety of the natural world and remind visitors that Poehlmann is an artist with singular vision, who has devoted decades to her subjects and still marvels at their "absolute beauty" every time she sits down to work.

Many who attended Poehlmann's 2015 retrospective at the RedLine Gallery were just as wowed by her artistic and technical virtuosity. "I'm still coming out of the clouds ... I got to see all these old pieces that I hadn't seen in years and years," she says of the show, which represented 50 years of her work. "There's a certain joy I feel when I'm creating. And I hope that overflows into what other people see, too." ●