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Winston-Salem Monthly Magazine ©  
The Creative Collective

## Drawn From Earth

Trena McNabb, painter

By Sharon Nelson / Portrait by J. Sinclair  
April, 2011

Trena McNabb's love of nature is apparent from the moment one first glimpses her creekside home in Bethania. Large trees shelter native woodland plants; birdfeeders and boxes are filled and active; and in summer, a wildflower meadow is filled with a colorful mix of blooms, including several endangered species and new plantings of nearly forgotten botanicals.

This passion for nature is also evident in her artwork. Detailed drawings of plants, birds, and earthly elements blend with an almost spiritual overlay – reminiscent of storyboards and, at times, nearly dreamlike.

"I do a lot of research on the computer," McNabb says. "I subscribe to so many magazines for their pictures."

In her studio and around her home are displays of tree branches; dried leaves and flowers are preserved in a custom-built plant press.

"I call this my morgue," McNabb says with a laugh, pointing to several file cabinets. "I have folders filled with photos, magazine clippings, drawings that I've done – each labeled by plant, type of bird, individual flower or tree, or some by season."

McNabb's work stands out among other visual artists. Her style is distinct: rhythmic, earthy, and nearly impossible to categorize.

"It is akin to collage in that I put these different pieces together, but it's contemporary but also realistic."

McNabb remembers the happy accident in which her layered images were first created.



**Some people refer to Trena McNabb's work as a multilayered, transparent montage of images, each with its own allegory. She says she wants her artwork to be a blend of realism and imagination. "I want viewers to look beyond the obvious and think."**

"I had drawn a figure and just wasn't happy with it. It didn't please me. So I decided to play with it," she recalls. "I was going to just mess it up, but as I began to add paint, or make a line over what was there, I realized that something entirely new was coming out of it."

Her recent work includes a series of Mother Earth images, born from a Native American women's conference held at Wake Forest University a few years ago.

"I was listening to this woman tell the story of Mother Earth," McNabb says, "and how every element corresponded in some way to the female body. Rocks are her bones, water her blood, wind her hair. It just hit me that this was what I wanted to paint."

In each painting in this series, a female figure is hidden among those elements, drawn in and part of everything else.

McNabb continues to depict her love of nature in her newest work, a series of weather paintings that form a beautiful contrast to the Mother Earth series.

"I had done white on white for so long, and I was tired of it," she says, "so these are all black first."

The paintings are stunning and bold. Dark backgrounds enliven colors, and real leaves and pressed flowers are used over and under painted layers.

From drawing popular comic-book character Katy Keene as a child to painting plates for gifts as a teen, McNabb has turned her love of drawing and painting into a lifelong career. "I worked during the day as an artist director, and at night, I would come home and work on my own artwork," she says. "I made a habit of it."

### **Did you ever think that this is what you would be doing as an adult?**

It is all I ever thought of doing and all I have ever been – an artist. I was a commercial artist and a painter on the side. The job allowed me to paint what I wanted and to experiment. Now I am a painter full time.

### **What is your biggest source of inspiration?**

Nature. The endless fascinating variations in nature – so different, yet the same. I read a lot! I love stories.

### **What routines or rituals are part of your creative process?**

Turn the work upside down for a different perspective. I get completely away from the studio. I try to balance the studious, less physical hours of painting with something physical.

### **What advice do you give others who want to pursue creative outlets?**

Experiment. Don't be afraid to fail. Not everything will live up to your expectations, but look for the result that did and build on that.

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