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Prayer Chant by Star Liana York, a widely collected New Mexico sculptor.

PRAYER CHANT
STAR LIANA YORK

OCTOBER 2017

ELEGANT Restraint

Jhenna Quinn Lewis infuses her paintings
with delicate beauty and quiet mystery



BY GUSSIE FAUNTLEROY



▲ Bookends II, oil, 10 x 20.

◀ The Lost Earring, oil, 14 x 11.

JHENNA QUINN LEWIS was already painting still lifes, already honing her images down to an essence of quiet simplicity, when the first songbird fluttered into her work. It was September 2001, and the event that ushered in what has become Lewis' signature subject was anything but quiet or simple. When the Twin Towers fell in New York City, the artist was at home in Oregon working on paintings for an upcoming show. The event left her so horrified and saddened, she knew that whatever ended up on her next canvas had to be more than a beautiful picture of fruit. It needed to express a deeper underlying meaning. It needed to come from her heart. What emerged was a delicate still life of calla lilies, candles with flickering flames, white bowls, a white cloth—and a sparrow.

This and the works that followed were very well received, bringing Lewis new gallery representation and increased interest, and her works now hang in museum, corporate, and private collections around the country. Just as importantly, the birds gave her an expanded visual language to convey those things that were deeply important to her: a reverence for nature, a sense of mystery, the enchanting and sometimes whimsical quality of fairy tales and fables, and the poignant beauty of imperfection and impermanence.

A more recent painting, which was

selected for the 2017 Birds in Art show at the Leigh Yawkey Woodson Art Museum, combines each of these elements in an exquisite, engaging image. THE LOST EARRING depicts a golden-crowned sparrow perched on an antique Chinese wooden box. The bird's head is tilted slightly, the gaze directed knowingly at the viewer. A pearl-and-sapphire earring dangles from its beak. The background is a layered gradation of soft, dusky hues, focusing attention on the bird itself. For Lewis, the painting evokes the realm of fables and folklore in which animals play important roles, sometimes acting out of kindness to humans in need of help—in this case, finding and returning a treasured lost earring. At the same time, the bird itself is a symbol of mystery because this particular kind of sparrow is elusive, disappearing into the tundra of British Columbia and Alaska in the summer. Its song has been described as melancholy, although in Lewis' portrayal the sparrow is bringing a gift of unexpected joy.

LEWIS' OWN gift of artistic expression was an elusive part of her life for a number of years, hidden behind her early shyness and her father's belief that art was not a worthwhile career. Growing up in a suburb of Chicago, she delighted in roaming the woods near her home. Her eyes were wide open to the



BARBARA ORSOW



When Comes Autumn, oil, 24 x 20.

natural world, as well as to the seemingly magical ability of artists and illustrators to render that world. She remembers wanting to keep her second-grade reading book because it contained a small watercolor image of a seascape and seagull, which she returned to over and over. Later, on weekend trips into the city, she spent many enraptured hours at the Art Institute of Chicago. Her parents, on the other hand, had a less admiring view of those in the arts. They owned a five-star restaurant in Chicago, and her father also ran a concession at the airport, where he met a parade of celebrities traveling through. As a result, he came to equate artists with such offbeat characters as Jimmy Durante and Phyllis Diller.

When it came time for college, Lewis entered the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign with the intention of going into the sensible field of occupational therapy. She delved into areas of science she loved, including botany and zoology. But because of her major, she wasn't allowed to take the specific art courses she wanted. When she did take a class in drawing and design, she was so intimidated by the other art students that she did all of her assignments at home. Eventually she dropped occupational therapy and studied a broad range of subjects. Significant among them were the Japanese tea ceremony and the Japanese art of flower arranging. Both resonated with her personal aesthetic and philosophical leanings,

emphasizing the meditative qualities of simplicity and restraint.

Lewis had little opportunity to explore her interest in painting until she was in her early 30s, when she and her husband and two children moved to California. There, an aunt who painted portraits introduced her to the fundamentals of using color and working with paint. Lewis also took a few workshops, including an "amazing" class on the science of *trompe l'oeil* with Gerald Parker Hodge at the Scottsdale Artists' School. But mainly, she says, "I was pretty solitary and would spend time in a bedroom with paints, painting the same thing over and over." Her involvement with artists and the art world expanded when she opened a gallery in Northern California, which she ran for seven years.

Then came what she calls a "thunderbolt experience," propelling her into a full-time commitment to her own art. In 1998 a dear friend and the godmother of her daughter was diagnosed with cancer and given three months to live. The news brought to mind words often attributed to the Lakota leader Crazy Horse: "Today is a good day to die." Lewis had become acquainted with the phrase when her husband, working with Great Sioux Nation tribes for his PhD dissertation, was invited to take part in Lakota ceremonies. "I wondered, was it a good day to die? Have I done what I wanted to do?" she relates. "I realized, no, I have not. I have avoided it all my life."

Lewis closed the gallery and for a time focused on painting landscapes, turning to still life following the birth of her third child. With a baby it was much easier to paint indoors—although the artist laughs remembering the time she set up a still life with cherries, left the room for a few minutes, and returned to find cherry pits arranged where the fruit had been, her 2-year-old daughter under the table with cherry juice on her mouth. Fruit, china, candles, and other delicately rendered objects became Lewis' subject matter of choice—until that day in 2001 when larger events compelled her to incorporate the first bird.

TODAY, AT her home in Phoenix, OR, a small city southeast of Medford, Lewis works in a bedroom-turned-studio with



Un Moment de Reflexion, oil, 8 x 6.



The Ornithologist's Library, oil, 16 x 12.

a window at which a couple of scrub jays regularly knock with their beaks in hopes of receiving peanuts—which they almost always get. If they realize Lewis is not coming out with peanuts, “they do a beautiful little song,” she says. Inside, shelves contain many of the items she paints—antique Japanese and Chinese bowls, white lanterns, glass bottles, old books—as well as the things that inevitably come home with her from daily walks in the nearby hills: branches, leaves, feathers, bird’s nests, stones. Many of the birds she paints are inspired by pictures taken by a photographer friend. Others she studies and sketches from life. She also hopes to have access at some point to a local wildlife facility where she could study raptors and other larger birds.

In the meantime, Lewis continues to explore the seemingly endless possibilities of composition and color. “I love to use a lot of negative space,” she says. “I’m striving to see how much I can pull out of a composition.” She has also eliminated the need for multitudinous tubes of paint,

honing down her palette to basically four colors from which virtually all others can be derived. It’s a Dutch masters technique that endows a painting with greater internal harmony, she says.

Although the past year has brought great loss to Lewis’ life—including the deaths of her husband, adoptive father, and three close friends—the artist finds and expresses qualities of serenity, hopefulness, and even gentle humor through her art. Her own sense of internal harmony is reinforced as various aspects of her life converge in her work. Among these are birds and books. THE ORNITHOLOGIST’S LIBRARY was inspired by musings of “an imaginary library that included birds flitting about or resting amongst my shelves, as though it were an avian library,” she says. “What could be more delightful than researching birds and having them right there among the books with you?”

The painting also hints at impermanence, both through the environmental damage that threatens bird habitats and the increasing movement toward

technology and away from paper and books. “As we move forward, things that were once held dear are lost,” she says. “I wanted to capture in this piece what I hold dear.” Like the Japanese artists whose approach of elegant restraint has long inspired her, Lewis accomplishes this by focusing on a simple subject while everything around it softens and falls away. “I include only what I feel is necessary to impart a meditative thought or feeling,” she says. “I invite the viewer to slow down, be patient, and look. I want the viewer to walk away with a sense of peace.” ♦

Colorado-based Gussie Fauntleroy writes for a variety of art publications and is the author of three books on visual artists. Learn more at www.gussiefauntleroy.com.

**See more of Lewis’ work at
[www.southwestart.com/featured/
lewis-jq-oct2017](http://www.southwestart.com/featured/lewis-jq-oct2017).**