

# The Art of Nature

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## ***Two diverse artists get close to nature with grants from the Creative Work Fund***

Claudia Stevens is the surgeon of artists—exact and patient. She examines the intricate parts of a monkey flower under her microscope, then renders the seed pods, leaves and root structures perfectly in gouache, silver point and dry brush water color.

A photograph might depict these details well enough, but Stevens’ art translates the ethereal quality of live plants through translucent layering techniques.

Stevens studied printmaking and scientific illustration at UC Santa Cruz, and continued her art education at San Jose State University where she earned a master’s degree. That was 20 years ago. Since then, her illustrations have been commissioned by Sunset magazine, Rodale Press, Bantam Books and University Press. By necessity, teaching has dominated her art career.

Creating an art series requires a significant time commitment, which is hard to meet without the promise of compensation.

In 2010, Stevens’ application for a sizable grant made her dream of more hours in her sunny studio viable. She received \$40,000 from The Creative Work Fund (CWF) to produce a series of native plant paintings.

In 2009, she attended CWF’s grant workshop. The director liked her project concept and encouraged her to do more research and apply during the following cycle. When she approached the UC Santa Cruz Arboretum about her idea, they received it well. But, she says, “I don’t think any of us realized that I would get the grant.”

A unique funding opportunity, CWF supports collaborations between artists—like Stevens—and nonprofit organizations based in 14 California counties, including Santa Cruz. Since its inception, \$8 million in grants have been awarded to 243 projects. Currently, the fund distributes \$650,000 annually.

Frances Phillips, program director for the fund describes it as a “kind of quirky and specific grant.” At least two-thirds of the money must go directly to the artist for compensation, supplies, travel and other expenses incurred in creating art.

Blue elderberry, red maids and summer buckeye will be among the species documented in the new exhibit. Stevens captures the structure of each specimen from both live and dried samples first in pencil, then in paint. “It really does make a difference when I can work from the live specimens,” she says.

The paintings will go into a traveling exhibit this summer, showing at Filoli Gardens, Stanford University, The Museum of Art & History (MAH) and the Cooper-Adobe Historic Museum before coming to their permanent home in Santa Cruz.

While Stevens paints to keep native species knowledge alive, fellow CWF grant recipient Matthew Passmore is using the \$35,000 he received to create functional art in the form of clay nests for a threatened seabird on

Año Nuevo Island.

The rhinoceros auklet is no longer able to build nests on the island due to the disappearance of plants that would make the soil tenuous enough to support building. Until plants can be reintroduced successfully, “an interim housing solution is needed to keep the birds from being buried alive under collapsing soil,” says Passmore.

Michelle Hester, lead biologist for Oikonos Ecosystem Knowledge, approached Passmore in search of a creative solution to the needs of the mysterious birds. Passmore turned to Nathan Lynch, who chairs the ceramics department at California College of the Arts, for his expertise. Together, they conceived nests that will last, have aesthetic qualities and break down in an environmentally sound way.

“We were tremendously excited to collaborate on a project that had real world implications for a non-human species,” says Passmore.

In addition to CWF support, the nests were made possible by Año Nuevo State Reserve, the Luckenbach Trustee Council, Go Native Inc., California College of the Arts (CCA) and Rebar.

In October of 2010, the clay nests were implanted. Passmore says, “feedback will be provided by the animals. We are still waiting to see if they are inhabited. Confidence is very high that they will be successful, though.” The birds are expected to mate again in the next few months.

Four student-designed, initial modules were used last year to help develop the final prototype. One pair actually raised a chick in their clay condo called the “love shack.”

Each year CWF supports an array of unique collaborative projects, allowing artists to develop their work for the benefit of a nonprofit. This year the fund has invited literary and traditional artists to present proposals.

While their approaches to art may be drastically different, Stevens and Passmore’s CWF-funded projects each celebrate the intersection of nature and art.