

Listening to the wind

NATALIE MacKNIGHT

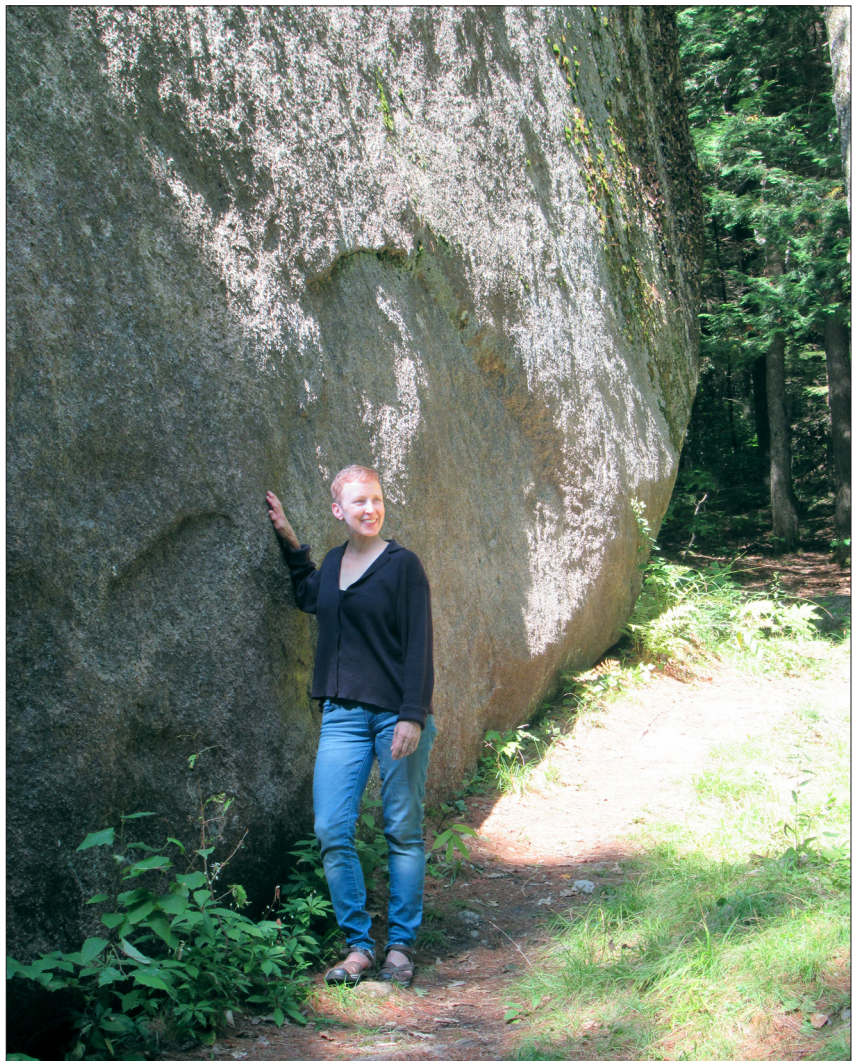
There's an affection artist Natalie MacKnight feels in nature, a feeling of time standing still, inviting quiet contemplation. This feeling comes from the spaces nature creates. Trees, rocks, fields, the shape of the land — even the scents and sounds — define the surroundings. They pull MacKnight in, inviting her to slow down, be aware of the moment, and take in nature's energy.

ROOTS OF INSPIRATION

MacKnight spent her childhood at Cedar Hill Girl Scout Camp in Waltham, Massachusetts. Cedar Hill is a gem within a small city, holding a tremendous diversity of landscape. Stone walls and welcoming trees of all shapes and sizes formed precious nooks and crannies, inviting exploration and inspiring curiosity.

MacKnight holds fond memories of Cedar Hill, where the sights, sounds and scents of nature created an indelible sense of place in her mind. A stone bench hidden in a hedge of lilacs... Crisp autumn leaves blowing about, filling the air with a warm, cozy scent... Naked branches clattering against the deep blue sky in the dead of winter... These are the roots of MacKnight's inspiration.

For vacations, MacKnight's family headed north to their cottage on a small lake in the White Mountains of New Hampshire. The magnificent mountains and cold, boulder-strewn rivers fed into her love of nature and being outdoors, but rarely elicited the same feeling of comfort as Cedar Hill's quiet spaces. For that, she turned to the night sky. It was pure magic. Void of light pollution, the star-strewn skies of New Hampshire intensified MacKnight's connection to nature.



As a child, MacKnight dreamed of capturing the precious, magical feeling nature instilled in her, but how? She had neither the words, nor the artistic skills to even begin to convey something so intangible.

The Madison Boulder—
The largest glacial erratic in North America, and a source of inspiration for MacKnight.

BECOMING AN ARTIST

An affinity for nature and art, along with a meticulous attention to detail, runs deep in MacKnight's family, yet there was also an underlying message that being an artist was no way to earn a living. When MacKnight began to think about college, her art teacher suggested she consider a career in graphic design. MacKnight wasn't exactly sure what graphic design was, but she liked the idea of earning a living through her creativity.

MacKnight graduated with a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in printmaking with a concentration in graphic design. After college, she worked at an ad agency for a few years and then set out on her own as an independent graphic designer. Though the intense nature of creativity-on-demand left little time or energy for indulging in fine art, much of MacKnight's aesthetic training — including color, composition, mood and detail — came about through her decades-long career in design.

RETURNING TO FINE ART

Re-entry into fine art was a gradual process. Initially MacKnight focused on small-format landscape collage. It was a scale and medium that suited her work schedule as well as her table top "studio." For inspiration, she turned to memories of Cedar Hill, striving to convey the essence of those memories through her art.

Her work began to evolve after she participated in a workshop on mono-printing with acrylic paints. MacKnight's painting experience had been very limited: in college, the one watercolor class she took was (in her mind) a disaster; she'd never worked with oil paint; and she'd only dabbled with acrylics. MacKnight had always preferred printer's ink and a wood block or etching plate over paint. Then, in that one-day mono-printing workshop, she discovered how much fun paint could be when she swapped brushes for brayer rollers and palette knives.

Back in the studio, MacKnight began a new body of work. Rolling paint directly on the paper, she built up layers, applied more paint with a palette knife, and pushed it around with a bamboo skewer to add visual texture.

The result was a series of dynamic color fields that she pieced together to form landscapes and ocean views. Thematically, this fusion of collage and painting became an exploration of the horizon as a source of introspection.

MAKING A MARK

Making marks in the paint with palette knives and other non-traditional tools reminded MacKnight of her first semester in college when one of her professors asked his students to cover a sheet of paper with marks. And then another sheet, and another. The entire semester was spent making marks on paper with ink and other media. This was a source of frustration for a number of students, including MacKnight. "We were there to create Art," MacKnight recalls, "and this wasn't Art."

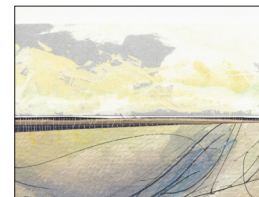
That sentiment soon dissipated... Just two years later she elected to do an independent study under that same professor's guidance to focus on mark-making and collage.

Mark-making has become an integral aspect of MacKnight's process. When she looks at fine art, regardless of style or period, she sees the marks, lines and textures. They draw her in. It could be a single, delicate line or a bold brush stroke or maybe a particular edge. Similarly, when she looks at the landscape around her, what fascinates her

"I am so excited to hang it in my house. The artwork evokes such a wonderful feeling for me."

— Susan Crane

are the imperfect lines, such as the crooked branch of a sycamore or the shriveled petal of a wild flower past its prime.



Dayspring

Mixed media collage
5.75" x 3.875"



Whispering Shore

Acrylic on paper
6" x 4.75"



You Say, I Say Gouache on paper, 30" x 22"

A NEW MUSE

On a mid-winter day while walking through the woods near her home, MacKnight took notice of the shapes within the old fieldstone walls. She'd walked along these walls many times before, but this time the relationships among the stones against the soft, white snow grabbed her attention. Small stones supported much larger ones; others teetered on edge, relying on neighboring stones to hold them upright.

Observing the stone walls in this way brought forth a cascade of memories. From the time she was a young child, MacKnight has been hooked on rocks. The first thing she did with the Red Flyer wagon her parents gave her was to fill it with rocks. Then there were the stone walls that carved out spaces at Cedar Hill, occasional rock-picking excursions to old mines in New England, the worn granite beds of New Hampshire's rivers, and the unforgettable Madison Boulder: a glacial erratic that keeps a quiet watch over the surrounding forest.

Up until this point, most of MacKnight's art had been quite small: 7" x 5" or less. Small-format work carries an inherent intimacy through the creative process, as well as for the viewer. The energy she saw in the stone walls, however, was calling for a much larger format. In the move to large format, she decided to work in black and white. "There's an appealing directness within black and white works on paper," MacKnight says. "The thinnest line can convey the utmost intimacy, while the boldest swash dares a viewer to turn away."

As MacKnight opened a 55" x 10' roll of watercolor paper to cut a sheet to size, for a moment she wondered what she'd gotten herself into. The roll was nearly as tall as herself, and it was reluctant to flatten.

But once she started putting paint to paper she was head over heels.

Working in large format has allowed MacKnight to expand her expression by bringing a more dynamic gesture to her artwork.

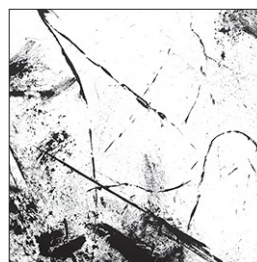


Stone Wall Series No. 7
Gouache on paper
41" x 55"

The feeling MacKnight gets when she creates art is very similar to that of time spent in nature. "It's like a complex puzzle coming together," she says, "where all the elements are gathered and arranged just so, and then, finally, there's a sense of being able to breathe again."



Stone Wall Series No. 5
Gouache on paper
41" x 55"



Detail of marks

IT'S ALL ABOUT CONTEXT

When the pandemic hit and the world shut down, MacKnight rediscovered a boulder-strewn trail at the end of her neighborhood.

Walking the trail on a near-daily basis, and in the absence of the usual noises drifting in from civilization, she observed the micro-changes that make up seasonal shifts, effecting light, texture, and line of sight.

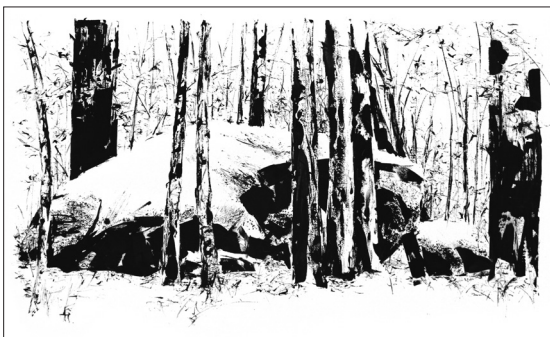
At first, the boulders appeared to be randomly plopped down here and there. As she became more familiar with the forest, the context became clear: these boulders were a parade of over-sized bread crumbs dropped by receding glaciers.

In the temporary quiet of the shut-down, MacKnight came to appreciate the powerful presence of the forest boulders and how they define the space within their environment.

The forest boulders became a new source of inspiration for MacKnight, leading to an expansion of her mark-making tools and techniques to convey the essence of towering pines, close-knit hemlocks, and deciduous foliage.



The Migration, Gouache on paper, 15" x 10.5"



Generations, Gouache on paper, 18" x 12"

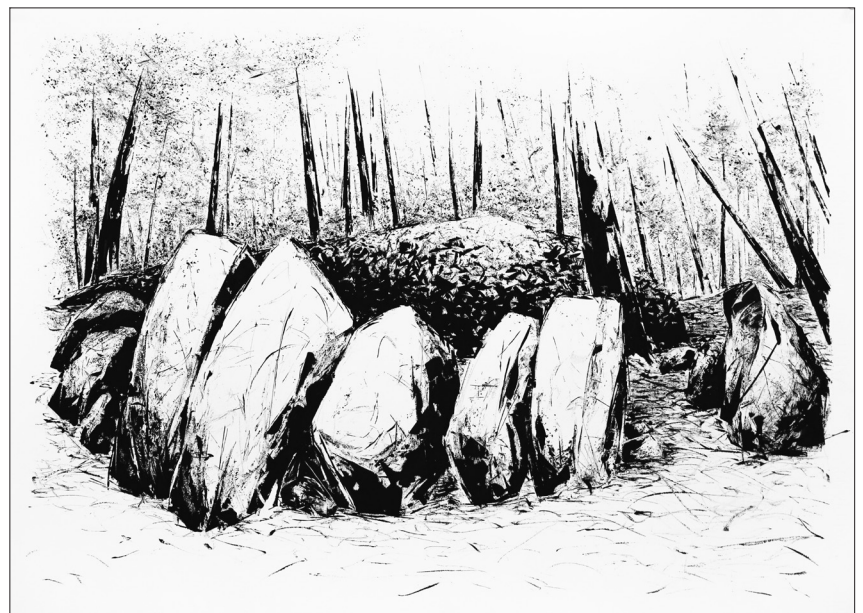
LISTEN TO THE WIND

Of all of nature's wonders, MacKnight finds the wind to be the most precious. Whether it's the slightest wisp through an open window or a ghostly howl winding through the trees, the wind brings MacKnight into a space where time seems to hover. "The wind is nature's way of reminding us she's always there," says MacKnight. "And if we pay close attention, our mind can float along with her."

The magic and inspiration MacKnight felt as a child are continually renewed by time spent outdoors. She enjoys nature and the landscape most when on her bicycle. Whether on the trails or on the roads, it is the landscape that drives her.

When she travels, MacKnight is always on the look out for nature's precious nooks and crannies. Highlights include Newfoundland, where the forest floors are covered in thick blankets of lush moss flowing over rocks and tree stumps; and North Dakota where she awoke late one night to the flashing lights of a thunderstorm off on the horizon while the Milky Way stretched out overhead across the clear black sky.

Today, artist Natalie MacKnight lives in Bolton, Massachusetts — "Apple Country" — where she finds plenty of inspiration. Her studio is located a few miles away in an old, brick school building that has been converted into artist studios. She often bicycles along back roads to her studio, passing orchards, agricultural fields and pastures, and stopping to assist turtles across the road.



Family Reunion, Gouache on paper, 17" x 18"

"Your art connects with people's emotions and curiosities. Your works offer the viewers a wonderful experience."

— Lily Chen