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# Concours WEEK

# The Carmel Pine Cone

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27A

## Celebrating the essence of nature

A CURIOUS thing happened to Mari Kloepfel the other day as she stood at her easel, immersed in intimate concentration on the image of a bobcat she was painting for an upcoming exhibition at Winfield Gallery.

“His tail wagged, right in front of me,” said the artist, who specializes in intricate, soulful animal renderings. “It’s happened before — a peripheral-vision kind of thing — and it’s like, ‘Oh, I’m getting it. I’m capturing it ... he’s really here.’”

“They start moving in front of me. Sometimes they blink ... I’m not hallucinating,” she said. “I’m just deep into my work and starting to capture that essence or soul that I’m trying to depict. It is always

animal myself, with my own eyes,” said Kloepfel. “I created the position of the buck after watching them recline in the bushes behind my art studio. And I knew what I wanted to do with the bobcat painting after observing them on our property — and growing up with them.”

### Energy and essence

The remarkable details in her work are secondary to capturing the energy and the essence of each individual animal.

“It’s not just a buck. I want to capture the soul of that particular buck,” she said.

“While Kloepfel’s technique is traditional, her approach to painting animals is not,” wrote Scott Shields, associate director and chief curator of Sacramento’s Crocker Museum, in the catalogue for her 2009 one-person show. “That her animals are beautiful is nothing new to art history, but these animals also are heroic. These are portraits.”

Kloepfel was 6 years old when she moved with her family from San Jose to 40 acres of bare land between Aromas and San Juan Bautista, where her father raised black Angus cattle and she and her two siblings rode a handful of adopted horses.

“The five of us lived in a single-wide mobile home — two bedrooms, one bath — for many years while we were building our house,” she remembered.

Young Kloepfel immediately loved her rural surroundings, embracing the physicality of the farm lifestyle.

“As a family, we worked with the cattle and horses, and we all helped build the house and ranch. I’ve been using skill saws, table saws and chainsaws since I was a little girl,” said Kloepfel. As a college student, she used those chainsaw skills to cut down trees and clear brush as a ranger’s aide.

“My dad taught my sister and me that there’s nothing a man can do that a woman can’t, period. Just be careful,” she said.

### Enamored with nature

She was enamored with nature, packing up her sketch pad and riding into the hills with her pony and frequently sleeping outdoors on a blanket, stargazing until she dozed off.

Kloepfel was artistic throughout her school years, ultimately receiving the Bank of America Art Award as a senior at Hollister High School, from which she graduated with honors.

She moved on to Ferris State University in Big Rapids, Mich., then Gavilan College (one year each), studied in England for a semester at Sheffield University, and then, in 1985, graduated with distinction from San Jose State, earning a bachelor’s degree in fine art/painting.

Kloepfel worked eight years in Morgan Hill as a professional horse trainer at an Arabian horse ranch to finance her art education, an experience that inspired

## Carmel’s Artists

By DENNIS TAYLOR

a great sign that the painting is nearing completion.”

The bobcat, serene but alert as he gazes over his right shoulder, is one of two renderings Kloepfel will exhibit at Winfield’s monthlong multi-artist show planned for an unspecified date later this year.

The other is a formidable buck lounging comfortably, his six-point rack silhouetted against rays of sunlight.

“When they’re in rutting season, they’ll mate here on our property. They’re macho and tough, so full of virility at that time of year. But when the does are off to themselves and the day closes, the bucks are very quiet and relaxed,” said Kloepfel, who lives on a Royal Oaks ranch, minutes from Elkhorn Slough, with her husband, fellow artist and custom frame-maker Klaus Kloepfel.

### ‘Capturing their soul’

She paints creatures large and small, wild and domestic, four-legged or feathered, always from personal observation, studying directly from life rather than relying heavily on photographic references.

“It doesn’t matter if it’s a bobcat or a horse — I need to be able to watch the



PHOTO/DENNIS TAYLOR

Winfield Gallery artist and local environmental activist Mari Kloepfel specializes in portraits of wild and domestic animals that she observes on her property near Elkhorn Slough.

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## ARTIST

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her to apply to veterinary school at UC Davis.

But her life was about to take a dramatic turn.

In 1986, while riding alone in the hills near the ranch, her training horse tripped in a field, somersaulted and landed on top of her, critically injuring her. A co-worker found her later in the day.

Following months of recovery and rehabilitation, Kloepfel suffered life-threatening complications from a drug used to complete diagnostic images, leaving her temporarily blind and paralyzed.

Medical intervention saved her again, and she made a full recovery. But the traumatic experience led to “a profound epiphany,” Kloepfel said.

“I quickly resolved to abandon my plan for vet school and chose instead to immerse myself in my art, focusing entirely on celebrating nature and the animal kingdom,” she said.

### Love at first date

In 1989, she met Klaus Kloepfel, a native of Germany, when he visited the Morgan Hill ranch where she was working as a horse trainer. They were in love by the end of their first date and were married the following year at a courthouse in Sonderborg, Denmark.

“I had just been accepted to the graduate department of California College of Arts and Crafts in Oakland but decided to move to Germany to be with Klaus,” she said.

While living in Mainz, Mari Kloepfel entered graduate school at Gutenberg University, pursuing her evolving interest

in representational art. But she left after just one semester, returning to California after her father was diagnosed with Stage 4 cancer.

### Protecting Elkhorn Slough

Her dad, given 10 months to live, survived seven years, during which the Kloepfels settled near Elkhorn Slough, the tidal salt marsh and wildlife sanctuary that became an intense new obsession.

“It got into my soul, this area. It’s just so interesting with the saltwater coming in,” she said. “Seven miles inland, you get sharks, seals, otters, and all of the migrating birds. It really got into me.”

The Kloepfels became activists, and in 1999, they founded Friends, Artists and Neighbors of Elkhorn Slough, a non-profit dedicated to protecting the slough and other environmentally sensitive areas of the county from inappropriate development.

“I am so grateful to be living in this beautiful area, and it is my honor to help protect it through activism and by creating paintings and drawings of the wild native animals that call this place home.”

Kloepfel’s art has been exclusively represented by Chris Winfield and the Winfield Gallery since 1999, which she characterizes as “one of the most rewarding experiences of my life.”

“Chris is a consummate professional,” she said. “He’s also a mentor who encourages his artists and provides a sense of trust and joy in the way he markets and supports our work.”

Kloepfel’s art can be seen at Winfield Gallery (Dolores Street between Ocean and Seventh) and can be viewed at [winfieldgallery.com](http://winfieldgallery.com).

**Editor’s note: A different, older story was reprinted with Kloepfel’s photo last week. We apologize for the error.**