

An Artist for All Seasons



Carol Beesley has plenty to smile about these days as she reconnects to her Oklahoma ties, reaches out to a new generation of OU students, and is hard at work in her Norman studio creating distinctly Oklahoma landscapes for an upcoming gallery show.

BY LYNETTE LOBBAN
PHOTOS BY ROBERT TAYLOR

**Combining realism and fantasy,
Carol Beesley brings a new voice to the
icons of the American West.**

The sandstone bluffs above the Chama River bask in the afternoon sun like a huge cat curled at the feet of the Sangre de Cristos while a lone figure picks her way among the desert grasses and low-lying shrubs. In jeans, boots and cowboy hat, Carol Beesley looks more rancher than artist, save for the camera around her neck. She has come again to make a portrait of the landscape, finding a fissure in the familiar rocks as one would discover a new wrinkle on the face of an old friend.

The University of Oklahoma professor emeritus of art has spent much of her life in rugged terrain from Oklahoma's Wichita Mountains to the canyons of New Mexico. "When you encounter a landscape in an honest way, it has a voice that is beyond words," says Beesley, "one that echoes the whole sense of its history, both geologically and in human ways."

Working with a vibrant, but controlled, palette, Beesley takes the essence of the familiar landscape of the American West and cranks it up notch. Think Ernest L. Blumenschein on acid.

"There is no question that when you look at her work, you recognize the place," says Bill Ray, associate vice president for academic affairs at OU-Tulsa. "But there's a delightful surprise when you look at her palette."

Ray immediately thought of the artist's brilliant landscapes when looking for strong visual elements to complement the neoclassical design of OU-Tulsa's new \$8.5 million Schusterman Learning Center. He tracked down Beesley at her studio in Santa Fe.

"After visiting with Jack McSorley [the architect], it was as if we became partners on the project," she says. "We both wanted something uniquely Oklahoman for the center." A friend suggested Quartz Mountain, and it rang true. "I know this land; I have a history there," she says.

The first thing visitors see when they enter the new building is a fiery sunset over Lake Altus, one of four panels in Beesley's "The Four Seasons of Quartz Mountain." The large canvases depict the Oklahoma landscape through changes of season and perspective, from a panoramic view of the mountains to a close up of a green-spotted mountain boomer. The artist says the project brought her home to Oklahoma.

During her 24 years at OU, Beesley taught ceramics, drawing,

painting and history of photography until retirement in 1997 when she moved to Santa Fe. There she continues to teach painting in the University's Summer in Santa Fe program although she will be the first to tell you she never considered art as a first career choice.



A blazing sunset over Lake Altus is one of four panels in Beesley's "The Four Seasons of Quartz Mountain," created for the Schusterman Learning Center at OU-Tulsa.

Beesley grew up in the azalea-infused town of Mineola, Texas, 80 miles east of Dallas. Her father was a 1934 graduate of OU and a Delta Tau Delta, who made his living in the oil business. Her mother ran a flower shop from the large Victorian house her grandfather built in 1901, while Carol poured over Zane Grey westerns. During her college years she applied for jobs at summer camps so that she might escape into the American West of those novels. "The first place I chose was as far away from home as I could get—Montana," she recalls.

"I guess I have always had a sense of adventure."

After earning a master's degree in English at the University of Kentucky, she began teaching at a junior college in Dallas. Five days a week she taught "bonehead English" to students who had little appreciation for the written word. "That was the class that sealed the deal—I just decided I could not grade papers the rest of my life." She threw herself back into academic life, taking art classes at the University of Dallas, then UCLA.

At UCLA she was literally shamed into taking photography classes by friends in the MFA program. "They told me no one should graduate with an MFA without knowing the basics of photography," she says. "I took a class and simply went nuts over it. I knew at the time that it was something I would love for the rest of my life."

Just before graduating in 1973, she accepted a position at Cal Poly Tech in Pomona. Then one night she came out of the ceramics lab and noticed on the bulletin board, hanging by a single

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Beesley lets students express themselves in a wide variety of media in her drawing classes. She has been known to offer up “charcoal on a stick” to students. Here, studio art senior Thomas Drusen creates a landscape in crayon.

pin, an announcement of a teaching job in ceramics at OU. “At the time I had a job, but do you know what? I sent off a resume and [director] Joe Hobbs called me. I went back and called Cal Poly, and the rest in history.”

At OU, she began to develop her style of richly colored landscapes, crediting the Fauves, especially Henri Matisse and Andre Derain, as well as the post-Impressionists.

“I loved Gauguin in particular, for his construction and color sense. It had an edge. When I started this line of paintings, I was shattering the representational image into distinctive marks with paints, very abstracted,” she explains. Even though Beesley’s landscapes are realistic in composition, nature’s colors are just the jumping-off point.

“I love the colors in postcards from the ’30s and ’40s,” she explains. “The postcard is meant to be a memory. It represents what you have seen, but it isn’t really what you’ve seen. It represents something that goes beyond your experience. That’s what I try to do with my art.”

Like postcards, her paintings begin as photographs. “I have

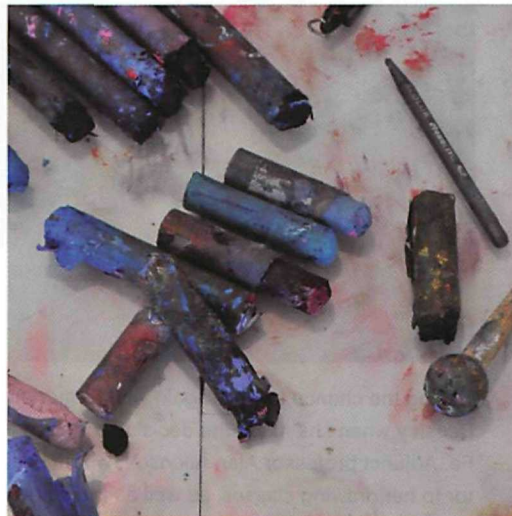
to photograph places several times before I feel comfortable painting them,” she says. Once she is satisfied with an image, she divides it into a grid, and meticulously reproduces it on canvas in pencil. Her saturation of color is achieved through oil sticks, pigments that are combined with wax and rolled into a crayon.

Her work is photorealistic in terms of proportions and elements, but it explodes with electric colors that invite interaction. Viewers can almost warm their hands on the red of glowing rocks or feel the cool of the sublimely blue water. The combination of the real and the surreal is what makes her paintings so compelling.

“My first series of paintings where I developed that style was of the Grand Canyon,” she says. One of those early paintings was featured in the Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art exhibit “Sooners in the Land Enchantment,” which included fellow Oklahoma artists T.C. Cannon,

Allan Houser, Woody Crumbo and Oscar Jacobson, the first director of the OU School of Art.

Across the street from the museum, a quartet of Beesley



The artist’s favorite colors can be identified in the assortment of oil sticks she keeps within easy reach of her canvases at her Norman studio.

paintings glows like stained glass from the second story of the Catlett Music Center. The four large works of the Oklahoma Arbuckle Mountains are dedicated to her husband, composer Michael Hennagin. Beesley and Hennagin met at a New Year's Eve party in 1982, and "Unless one of us was out of town," she says, "we were never apart after that."

A student of Aaron Copland, Hennagin began his career writing soundtracks for television and film, as well as scores for ballet and stage productions before coming to OU as composer in residence in 1972. Between them a creative synergy sparked. "He thought I was this Texas wild woman," she says with a smile.

Their life was filled with concerts, travel, symphonies, art openings. On their wedding day artists and musicians gathered in a pouring rain that did not dampen anyone's spirits. They continued to teach at OU and spent summers in Crested Butte and Santa Fe, saving the last week of the summer for the city's famed opera festival.

In 1993, Hennagin completed "Proud Music," setting to music texts of Walt Whitman's "Proud Music of the Storm" and "I Hear America Singing." It would be his last composition. He died unexpectedly in Norman in June that year at the age of 56.

In his honor, Beesley established the Michael Hennagin Prize in Composition, awarded biennially through the School of Music for a new work by a composer currently enrolled at or seeking admission to OU.

After a decade in Santa Fe, the artist is back at work in Norman—in the classroom and the studio. When she is not teaching in the School of Art, she is painting.

While everyone else was taking cover during the winter ice storms, Beesley took to the streets in her four-wheel drive, wonderfully chromatic in pink beret against the gray sky. She was working on a large canvas in her north campus studio and would not be deterred, ice or no. The new works will debut in



Dr. Gerard Clancy, president of OU-Tulsa, and Beesley pose at the dedication of the Schusterman Learning Center, where the artist unveiled her suite of Quartz Mountain paintings.



Having the chance to work again with former students and colleagues was a big draw for Beesley when she made the decision to return to the University of Oklahoma from Santa Fe. Adjunct professor Alan Atkinson, whom she taught in the 1970s, is a frequent contributor to her drawing classes, as well as the curator of her current photography exhibit.

the show, "A Personal Nature," opening at the JRB Art Gallery in Oklahoma City this summer.

"She is so clearly enthusiastic about creating art," says one of her former students. "The overriding atmosphere of her class was that this was not only going to be beneficial, it was going to be fun. She invites you to join her parade."