

Regina Macedo: Researcher and artist of the Amazon

Regina Macedo has been living a double life for decades. Some know her as an academic, leading research in her field. Others know the painter behind dozens of vibrant canvases. The two worlds rarely collide, but Macedo excels in both.

At the University of Oklahoma, Macedo is best known for her scholarly accomplishments. But in the 1980s, the Brazilian native was working as a secretary in her homeland and bored stiff. A former professor suggested she apply for graduate fellowships in the United States and earn her Master's of Science degree. Little convincing was necessary before Macedo and her husband were on their way to Norman.

"Lots of doors were opened to me by very special people at the right times in my life, and I always said 'yes' even if I didn't know exactly what I was doing," Macedo says. "I think because of that a lot of great things that happened in my life were by chance, and that's not a bad thing."

Macedo, 60, has published dozens of articles, mostly about birds and animal behavior, in peer-reviewed journals, contributed chapters to about a dozen books and authored four of her own. She served as president of an international organization dedicated to the study of animal behavior; traveled the world for research; has spoken at more than 100 international conferences; and, for the past 25 years, she has been fostering a new generation of researchers

at Universidade de Brasília. Currently, Macedo lives in Ithaca, N.Y., where she was awarded a teaching fellowship at Cornell University.

"I wasn't looking for success," says Macedo modestly. "It just happened."

Born in São Paulo, Brazil, Macedo is one of six children whose father's Brazilian Air Force career kept the family on the move. When Macedo was six, they moved to Montreal and her father's artistic talents began to rub off. That year, Macedo won a children's art contest with her depiction of the dangers of playing with matches, which sparked a lifelong love for drawing and painting. She returned to Brazil a few years later but had forgotten much of the Portuguese she grew up with and could no longer read or write in her native language. Macedo's parents put her in an American school where she continued learning in English and regained her Portuguese.

Throughout nearly 12 years of higher education, she traveled back and forth between the U.S. and Brazil. Before becoming a Sooner, she earned an associate degree from a liberal arts college in Massachusetts, a Bachelor of Science in Ecology

from Universidade de Brasília and received a Master of Education from Lesley University through a distance-learning program at the American School in Brazil.

Macedo is not boastful about her success, often giving the credit to a spell of good fortune or timing. But her for-



Natália Carvalho

Regina Macedo, who earned both her master's and Ph.D. in biology at OU, is as at home in the jungles of the Amazon as she is in the classroom or art studio.

By WHITNEY BRYEN



Carlyle Macedo

Macedo tries to capture authentic portraits of Brazilian Indians while researching their history and culture. "All of this is vanishing," she says, "including the diversity in human civilizations."



Miguel Merrini

Macedo is a role model and mentor to young women in the field of biology on two continents. With her in Brazil are current Ph.D. student, Lia Kajiki, left, and Renata Alquezar, who earned her doctorate last year. Macedo is at Cornell University this semester on a teaching fellowship. BELOW - In her painting, "All This," Macedo depicts a child from one of Brazil's Indigenous tribes. The artist says she fears that "all this" – a way of life and the jungle itself – are at risk of disappearing.

mer professors don't see it that way. Hardworking, humble and stubborn is how they remember her.

Michael Mares, professor emeritus and former director and curator at the Sam Noble Oklahoma Museum of Natural History, oversaw Macedo's Master of Science in Zoology. At the time, Macedo was studying mammals, particularly a rodent species in Central and South America. Field work can be demanding, dirty and tiring, but this is where Macedo seemed most in her element, Mares says.

"She had a presence about her. She didn't take a back seat to anyone intellectually," he says. "And she's tough, too, tough as a boot. Physically and mentally. She wasn't going to be pushed around. She isn't afraid of anything."

Professor Emeritus of Biology Gary Schnell, who introduced Macedo to birds and advised her Ph.D., remembers a similar woman.

"I was impressed at how ambitious she was from the very start," Schnell says. "She was not a timid person. She had to stand up for herself a lot in her life, and she did it throughout her career and her training."

Schnell and Macedo were a natural fit. Schnell was the curator of birds at the Sam Noble Museum, and Macedo wanted to take a deeper dive into animal behaviors by studying the social habits of birds. Brazil has one of the largest diversities of birds in the world, including many unstudied species, and with Macedo's intimate knowledge of the country and culture, it was a perfect pairing. She travelled to Brazil three times to study the peculiar breeding habits of a South American bird, the Guira Cuckoo.





Guira Cuckoos, Macedo explains, exhibit a rare type of breeding system that occurs in less than 16 of the more than 9,000 known bird species in the world. They nest communally, with up to seven females depositing their eggs in a joint nest. The entire group (males and females) incubates the eggs and rears the nestlings.

In addition to this cooperative and seemingly altruistic behavior, says Macedo, some nasty behaviors also occur. Group individuals eject each other's eggs from the nest and a lot of infanticide occurs once the eggs hatch, with individuals pitching chicks from the nest. Her research on the unusual bird has resulted in many publications in international journals.

"It was hard work, tracking around the bush carrying a long ladder, and climbing trees to check on nests," Macedo says. "But I was doing work I loved and much preferred the hard, physical labor to being cooped up in some office."

More challenging than the physical demands of her research were the long stints away from her husband. She was gone for nearly six months at a time, and without cell phones or video chats to stay connected the two wrote weekly letters. During her second research trip back to Brazil, Macedo was pregnant with her eldest daughter, who later accompanied her on the third research trip while Macedo was again pregnant, this time with her younger daughter.

Though she was focused mostly on research at OU, Macedo occasionally found time to practice her art. As a student Macedo was recruited by Mares to illustrate several books he authored once he discovered how talented she was.

"It was a surprise, even at that time. None of us knew how good she was or how serious she'd become."

Former OU adviser Gary Schnell and his wife purchased the Macedo painting, "Juntos," or "Together," which depicts a young boy holding a monkey. The boy is from the elusive Korubo tribe, which is estimated to have fewer than 200 remaining members, according to Macedo's research.

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Shortly after completing her Ph.D. and returning to Brazil, Macedo's first solo exhibition opened at the Canadian Embassy in Brasília. People, animals and landscapes make up most of her work, along with a few abstracts and still lifes — each of them vibrant with color, texture and movement. Macedo's paintings have been featured in more than 25 exhibitions since 1992, including five solo shows in Brazil.

More recently, her work has made it to the United States and into the private collection of her former professor. Early this year, Schnell and his wife purchased two of Macedo's paintings of Indigenous tribes of Brazil, which encompass many of her recent works. "Juntos" depicts a young boy with a mischievous look holding a monkey and covering his mouth with his hand. The boy is from the elusive Korubo tribe, which is estimated to have fewer than 200 remaining members, according to Macedo's research.

The second painting, "Amigos," is of a young girl daubing a tribal design around her eyes and grinning with a monkey resting on her arm. She is from the Baré ethnic group and became a popular child actress in Brazil in the early 2000s.

Macedo uses photographs of Brazilian Indians to inspire her portraits and researches their history and culture as she works on new pieces.

"All of this is vanishing, including the diversity in human civilizations," Macedo says. "I find their stories fascinating, the legends and myths about how they came to be or what they are or do. I see it as a way to honor those people."

"I always just took things as they came to me," Macedo says. "I'm just now setting goals, really. That's new for me."

As she continues developing a plan for the future and for her art, one thing is certain — she will almost certainly excel at her new endeavors.

"The problem is we only have one life, a certain amount of time," Macedo says. "I'm a fan of not focusing on one thing in your life. It seems too limiting and there isn't enough time for that."

Whitney Bryen is a freelance writer living in Norman.