

'Being There' With Linda Besse

by Myrna Zanetell

The day that three-year-old Linda Besse lovingly reached out to pet the nose of a zebra at the zoo, the youngster had no inclination that exotic animals and birds would eventually become her life's passion. Even at that early age her destiny already had been sealed. She says, "I always have had a deep empathy for animals and try to read their body language like I would that of a human, and I become even more aware of this intimate connection with each passing year."



Always drawn to the outdoors, Besse chose to major in geology at Colgate University, following her bachelor's degree there with a master's in science from Eastern Washington University. This training became her ticket to work assignments in the back country of Alaska, Nevada, Wyoming, Utah, and Montana.

Never considering a career in art, Besse's decision to try her hand at painting was a truly serendipitous happening. "In 1990, I saw a man painting plein-air scenes in Hawaii and thought that looked like fun so I went home, bought art supplies, and just started painting," she explains. After dabbling for a few years Besse got serious about her efforts, completing fifteen paintings in 1996, an accomplishment which prepared her for her first exhibition in 1998.

Besse currently combines her own passion for animals with an inherent love for travel. "Whenever you take an interesting trip, those memories stick with you for a lifetime. I enjoy visiting new places and now have traveled to twenty-seven countries." Photographing and

gathering research material during these travels has become an integral part of Besse's preparation for any new painting. "Having the correct habitat is what really makes your images come alive no matter what species you are portraying," she explains. "You need to understand not only the terrain and vegetation, but the quality of light is also critical. Iceland's light differs so much from Africa's light which differs from that in the mountains of Montana. It may sound implausible, but small things like smelling the air also make a difference in my ability to accurately capture the atmosphere I am trying to portray."

A recent visit to New Zealand allowed Besse to get a firsthand look at the world's only alpine parrot, the Kea, which is endemic to the South Island's high country. "I found them to be wonderfully inquisitive, intelligent and playful, and much larger than I expected, close in size to a red-tailed hawk. They are a dull greenish brown on the outside, but when they open up their wings you can see a brilliant orangey red, dots of yellow, black stripes, and turquoise at the ends of their feathers. Flocks would literally descend upon any parked car, grabbing the rubber molding around the windows, breaking off antennas and generally getting into mischief. They are like the raccoons of the bird world," she laughs. "This is the part of New Zealand where one minute you can be walking through a true tropical jungle

Above:
Linda gathering information

Left
Wrecking Crew

Opposite page:
Lord of the Mountains



and the next run into the terminus of a glacier.

"Birds have become a favorite subject for me because you can put them in so many different scenes, play with the colors, and even immerse them in water. I adore painting water because it has so many moods and colors." She adds, "I would put all my animals in water if I could, but not all like to swim."

Though a serious work ethic and her dedication to authenticity always win out when it comes to her art, Besse's playful personality and wonderful sense of humor continue to bubble just below the surface.

With this lighthearted approach to life, the artist finds something of interest wherever she travels, but she notes that some of her African adventures have been her most memorable. "I love Namibia – it was a wonderful spot to see herds and herds of animals with only a few tourists. Another thrill was canoeing down the Zambezi River in Zimbabwe never knowing what we would experience around the next bend. For instance, we camped along the river at night, and when I got up before sunrise one morning the largest elephant prints I have ever seen were in the dirt right behind my tent ...and I hadn't heard a thing," she marvels.

That scene remained in her memory bank, but it was not until years later, when the artist returned from an exhibition at the Gilcrease Museum in Tulsa, that she

was inspired to put this experience on canvas. "I saw how one western artist used a greenish blue gray to portray night scenes, and I wanted to try those colors as a technical exercise to add emotional excitement," she explains. The result was *Night Patrol* [see Besse's ad on page 1], an image whose star-sprinkled impressionist backdrop en-

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hances the sheer magnitude of Besse's mighty night visitor. A cheetah sighting on the same trip became her inspiration for several new images, both large and small. "Residents had not seen a

cheetah in that area of Zimbabwe for nearly two decades, so encountering one that was wild was a heartwarming testimony to the fact that conservation efforts are beginning to work."

Speaking of big cats and conservation, Besse continues to work with the International Snow Leopard Trust as part of their Artists for Conservation Partnership Program (ACPP). "Supporting the work of the Trust and spreading the news about their efforts to save the endangered snow leopard is a natural fit for me because I feel a deep attachment to all the animals I paint, especially the world's big cats. The reason I am particularly impressed with this group is because the Trust works in unique concert with indigenous peoples to maintain habitat as well as provide economic incentives for them. By creating an outlet for the local people to sell their handicrafts such

as baskets and clothing in exchange for their promise to protect the leopards, the economic needs of these people are balanced with the conservation of the leopards.” This year, Besse is donating an original painting of a snow leopard to further the efforts of the Trust.

Whether she is portraying African wildlife, exotic winged creatures, or even sea life, Besse’s work always exudes a wonderfully spontaneous quality. “I like doing something new in every painting,” she emphasizes. “One day, I may feel like painting water so I think, ‘I haven’t painted that animal in water before, or I have not done that type of reflection.’ On another occasion I did a painting with all shades of green in it. By the time I finished, I knew how green works for me, information that I was able to apply to future paintings.” Once she was inspired to do a puffin piece simply because she wanted to use a specific shade of blue whose hue was the same color as the ocean around Iceland. This type of diversity has become her spice of life. “My only limitation is that I like to work on only one painting at a time. Because I totally immerse myself in the geographic location, it is difficult mentally to be in two places at the same time. Trying to paint New Zealand in the morning and Africa in the afternoon just doesn’t work for me,” she laughs.

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Besse not only internalizes the locale, but as much as is humanly possible, she also places herself in the mind set of the animal she is painting. For

this reason, the artist makes a concerted effort to view her animals in their natural habitat. “I have a really hard time doing research at zoos. I feel for the animals and this inhibits my ability to paint; and unfortunately, zoo animals do not tend to exhibit their natural instincts.”

Her ideal encounter is epitomized in situations such as the day she stopped her car along the road in Yellowstone to observe a coyote. “Once he knew I would not intrude on his world, he began sniffing beneath a log – probably trying to determine where the chipmunk or rabbit had gone. He sat down and scratched his ear, wandered around for about twenty minutes, and then calmly strolled off to pursue his day. My main goal was to watch unobtrusively as he went about being a coyote.”

On such occasions, the artist also takes detailed photographs of her subject. “I work only from my own photos, and I now have more than 23,000 of them cross-referenced according to subject and location. In order to tell just the right story, I may choose details from as many as sixteen separate shots, fingering through the photos as I work.”

In August 2006, Besse and her husband Jim Olson scheduled a trip to Manitoba about sixty miles north of Churchill to see the beluga whales and polar bears in their summer habitat. “This is a really remote spot where we will see not only birds before they begin to migrate south, but also caribou, arctic fox, and arctic wolves. After that Jim and I will head across Canada to the north end of Vancouver Island to see the orcas, seals, black bear, dolphin, and bald eagles.” A lovely, small image *Johnson Strait*, which features an orca in the foreground against a stunning mountain backdrop, is typical of the sights they will enjoy.

Not all of Besse’s research is done in remote and distant locales. Her fourteen-year-old white cat Kitty allows the artist to observe her actions while accompanying her on daily patrols of Besse’s home in northeastern Washington state. “Sometimes I decide which direction to go, other times Kitty takes the lead. She has introduced me to so many places on our property that I didn’t even know existed.”

From home in Washington or from lands afar, Linda Besse combines intellect, research, and sensual awareness in a way that makes each painting say “this place and its animals are like no other.” Δ

Top left: *Sunrise Duet*

Bottom Left: *Grizzly Encounter*

See Linda Besse’s ad on page 1



Linda Besse

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