

Fine Arts: Must-see exhibit in Princeton



"Fisher Cat" by James Fiorentino. (Courtesy photo)



By **Janet Purcell** | For **The Times of Trenton**

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There's an exhibit happening now at D&R Greenway Land Trust that far surpasses other wildlife exhibitions I've seen. The artwork in it is so exceptionally well done it's considered an honor that Flemington artist, James Fiorentino, chose this venue to launch his three-year traveling exhibit that will be hosted by five other venues including Drew University in Madison and the prestigious Salmagundi Club in New York City, among others.

The exhibit is jointly organized by D&R Greenway and Conserve Wildlife Foundation New Jersey. Accompanying it the Olivia Rainbow Gallery, also at D&R Greenway's Johnson Education Center, will be an exhibit hosting the annual Conserve Wildlife Foundation *Species on the Edge*, an exhibition of award-winning art created by fifth graders throughout the state.

Fiorentino's exquisite paintings portray many of the state's most endangered and vulnerable species and he does so using his own signature style of photo realism executed in watercolors—an accomplishment very difficult to achieve.

Former New Jersey Governor Tom Kean, who will be at the opening reception, holds Fiorentino's work in such high regard, he wrote the Foreword to the book *Rare Wildlife Revealed. In Partnership with Conserve Wildlife Foundation*.

The two met when Fiorentino was a student at Drew University in the 1990's when former governor Kean was serving as the school's president. "Renowned as one of the best sports artists in the country, Jim's works hang in major museums." Kean is quoted in exhibition materials.

At age fifteen, Fiorentino was the youngest artist ever to have his work featured in the National Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, NY. According to exhibition materials, his mother, recognizing his exceptional talent, enrolled him in art classes when he was eight years old. He was painting wildlife when he was ten. His early influences were trips with his biology teacher

father and time spent on an uncle's farm in Frenchtown. He is now a trustee with The Raptor Trust of Millington where he studies rare and endangered birds up close. Photographs showing him holding them are in this exhibit.

Text panels giving information about particular species and story boards offering further less formal information on some paintings are interspersed throughout the exhibition. This is not only an educational exhibit (although it surely is that) but it is also a fun one where we can get to see a Bobcat walking in snow, his amber eyes looking right at us as if wanting to communicate---or maybe to see if danger is lurking nearby. We can see a beautifully patterned Corn Snake stretched out to investigate its surroundings as it descends down a tree trunk, and an Osprey in flight with a large fish caught in its talons.

An especially interesting facet of Fiorentino's artistic ability is how he is able to capture and portray the wild fierceness in his painting of the Bald Eagle—the piercing eye, the thick pointed feathers, the ominous curve of its hard beak—and then to turn his brush to a delicate White Checkered Butterfly lighting on a sun kissed orange flower. In this he captures the fragility of the white wings delicately warmed underneath by the orange hue of the flower reflecting up. He is even able to convey the momentary silence as the butterfly stills its fluttering.

Fiorentino's painting of a Peregrine Falcon is a bit different from the others in the exhibit. Whereas he usually depicts species in nature, this shows "Georgette" soaring over the George Washington Bridge. The story behind it is posted on the wall beside it and tells how Georgette was a fledgling nesting at the bridge. She fell, was injured, discovered by a bridge worker and "has been an educational bird with The Raptor Trust for 11 years." The image on display is Fiorentino's imaginative painting showing Georgette "taking flight once again at the busy place where she was found."

A large painting of a Humpback Whale dominates one far gallery wall drawing you closer and closer by its majestic presence. It's especially unique in that we don't usually think of Humpback Whales in New Jersey but they are part of our rare and endangered species. Fiorentino presents the whale in a vertical position rising up from the depths and just beginning to break water. Although most of the paintings on display are rendered in a broad spectrum of colors, this one is done in a limited palette of vibrant blues and silvery grays.

Fiorentino's paintings are realistic, but they have a quality about them that makes them more than what would be found in a photograph. It is as if we're catching a glimpse of our endangered and most vulnerable critters going about their daily business, living their lives. There's a Golden Crested Warbler perched on a branch singing out its joy while a Tiger Salamander creeps quietly along a leaf. There's a Little Brown Bat so intent on its prey it looks like it's going to fly right out of the picture frame while, in another room, a Piping Plover stands timidly in its watery reflection. A Harbor Seal skims through harbor waters and an Eastern Box Turtle walks softly at night.

This is a varied exhibit and much of it is inspired by what Fiorentino, his wife and sons see in their own backyard in Flemington.

"I am most fascinated by what inspires people," says D&R Greenway President and CEO. "By marrying his love of art and nature, James is now an inspiration for people of all ages who experience the wildlife of New Jersey through his paintings and stories as told in this unique exhibit. D&R Greenway is honored to be chosen for the premiere of this three-year traveling exhibit that supports our work to protect wildlife habitat here in our own back yard."

IF YOU GO

WHERE: D&R Greenway Land Trust, Johnson Education Center, One Preservation Place, Princeton.

WHEN: Through October 14. Hours: 10 a.m. to 5 p.m., Monday-Friday; OPENING RECEPTION: 5:30-7:30 p.m., Friday, September 30 with special guest, former Governor Tom Kean.

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