

DREAMSCAPES

If Paul Cezanne had been a modern wildlife artist, he would've painted Africa like Margaret Gradwell.

BY TODD WILKINSON

Margaret Gradwell

When Margaret Gradwell debuted a series of paintings in the United States roughly a decade ago, the works by this talented South African impressionist met with an immediate, enthusiastic reception, especially among collectors of wildlife art and western landscapes. It's a curious fact to mention considering Gradwell doesn't identify as an animal painter, nor do her scenes feature wildlife or the American West as prominent focal points between the frame.

The magic of her pastoral vision is that it holds universal symbolism, enabling viewers to see their own favorite places on Earth in her brushwork. And yet, for Gradwell, the scenes actually emanate from the ancient homelands of tribal wanderers and habitat, which gave rise to the most iconic wildlife species on earth.

"My paintings are all about meditations on the past and the future," she says.

Gradwell is no Romantic. Even though she's been inspired by Thomas Cole, a prominent force within the Hudson River School, and Englishmen Thomas Baines (who painted colonial South Africa and Australia), and William Turner, she's not looking to woo the viewer with a sentimental narrative. What she's after is creating a sensuous experience activated by our

response to color. Her palette radiates warm earth tones, her compositions excelling with dramatic meldings of earth, sky, and water. It is not uncommon to mistake her scenes for portrayals of the desert Southwest in the U.S.

"For travelers who love Africa but who are seeking alternatives to full-framed portrayals of big game animals on their walls, Margaret's paintings stand apart," says Ross Parker, owner of Call of Africa's Native Visions Gallery, based in Naples and Jupiter, Florida, which serves as Gradwell's exclusive U.S. representative.

"In the same way Albert Bierstadt and Thomas Moran painted the American West in the late 19th century, Margaret celebrates the scale and mood of landscapes where humans and animals are not dominant fixtures but set within larger volumes of space. If I had to describe them, I'd call them 'dreamy.'"

Parker says Gradwell's work fits as easily inside an adobe home in Santa Fe or Scottsdale as it does in Mediterranean-style villas in California, Florida, or Tuscany.

"The aesthetic of rustic, rural Africa is in my blood," Gradwell said. "Warm colors and texture are probably the most prominent visual aspects of Africa. Currently, there is a strong emphasis in local society to become more aware of the uniqueness of African

iconography as a lived experience."

She is drawn to stark landscapes, and in 2017 she plans to spend time in the Mojave and Sonoran deserts of America painting the red rock country, canyons, and arroyos.

"We can't wait to see how it stimulates further exploration in her work," Parker says. "Margaret's paintings have been some of our biggest sellers at Dallas Safari Club and the Safari Club International show in Las Vegas. The reason is you can relate to them. And recently, with her delving more into wildlife, not as main themes but as references of the wild places she is commemorating, demand from collectors has been on the rise."

Born in 1956 in Pretoria, Gradwell came of age at a time when the entire world was watching South Africa cope with the wrenching issues of co-existence, justice, freedom, and stakeholder in protecting nature for future generations.

Gradwell earned a fine arts degree in 1978 from the University of Pretoria, the largest residential university in South Africa. What began the following year as a junior teaching assignment evolved into a 32-year tenure as a professor and, ultimately, her becoming head of the department of fine arts. Many of the country's most distinguished young

painters took classes from Gradwell and her faculty contemporaries.

Eventually, however, she wanted to spend more time pursuing her own painting, so she left academia. She currently has two studios located in different parts of the country. Apart from painting, she's curator of the most extensive private collection of South African art. She's also among an influential group of people fostering a national conversation about how art can help make sense of the inspiring, and sometimes turbulent, changes occurring in her part of the globe, be it the dynamic of social tension in race relations, interpreting the juxtaposition of ancient traditions and modern living, or the challenges of preserving wildlife in an age of rampant poaching, habitat loss, and human poverty.

Early in her career Gradwell painted more abstractly and less realistically. In a way, her motifs today could almost be considered a modern form of magical realism in which she is continually exploring the intersection of humanity's relationship with the natural world.

"These themes have always been present in my work—there is a respective emphasis on the ancient, pristine wilderness and the heroic history of the people who inhabited the land then, and the privilege of still experiencing this natural phenomenon today," she says. "The natural world can be site-specific: a specific place or a general landscape. The uncluttered vastness of arid areas holds a fascination that, for me, is inexhaustible."

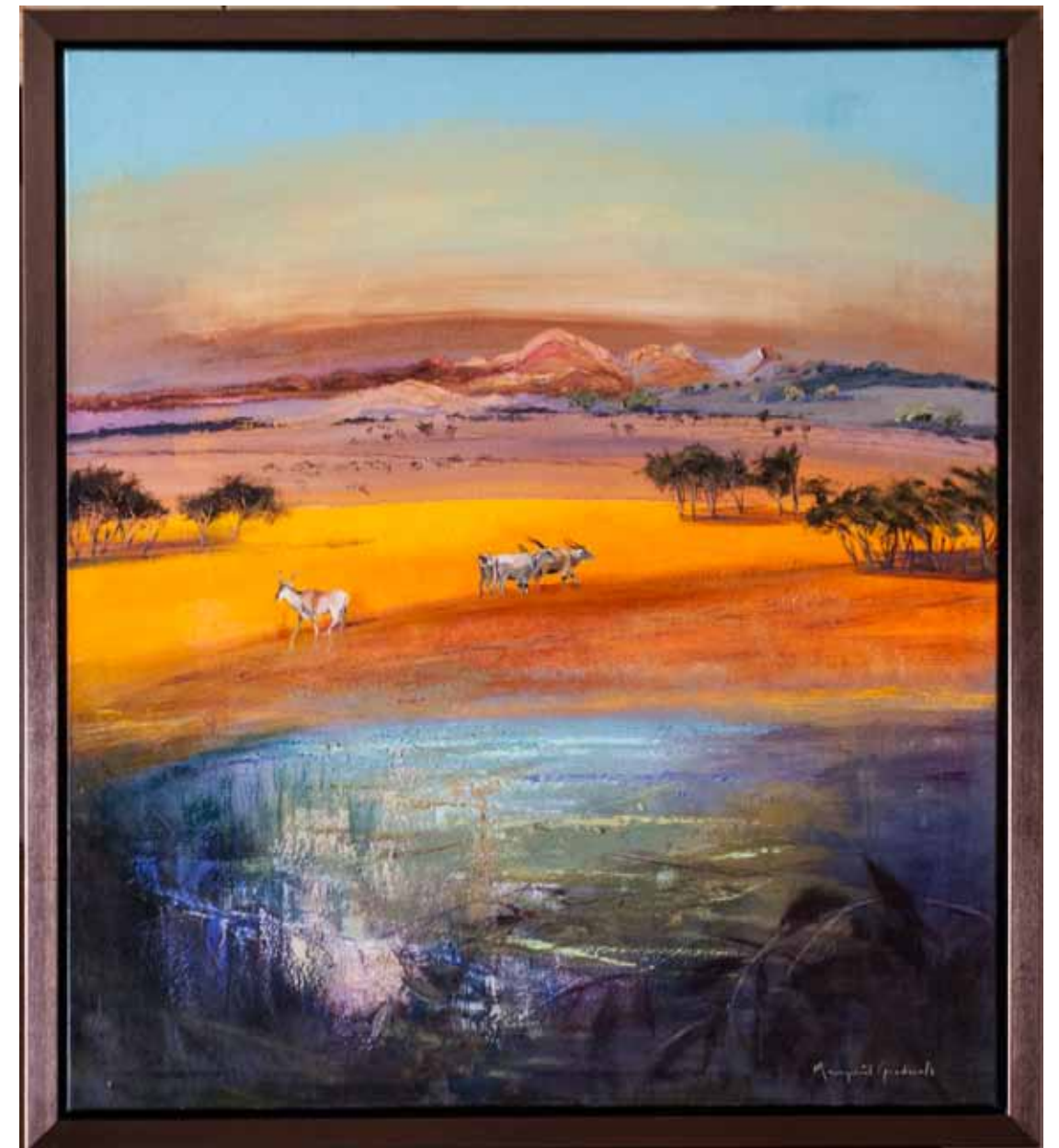
Her painting *Approach* portrays a group

of Cape buffalo charging forward through the veld, while *Quilted Land* and *Silent Advance* feature eland crossing an open flat. In *Tentative Respite*, wildebeest appear as silhouettes, as if presented as primitive pictographs on a cave wall. Her painting *Land of Plenty*, meanwhile, is a commentary about the memory of agrarian existence with Nguni cattle and helmeted guinea fowl. And then there is *The Drinking Hole*, which depicts a bubbling spring as an oasis during the dry season.

"Margaret is so versatile that she could paint anything and make it engaging," Parker says. "She takes on serious dramatic subjects, yes, but they are not loaded down with heaviness. Their vibrancy lifts you up, leaves you feeling refreshed."

While Gradwell's Paul Cezanne-like

Sunset at the River, a 59x51-inch oil and acrylic, showcases Gradwell's penchant for working with bright, luminous colors. Vast deserts and other arid landscapes hold a special fascination for the artist.



In Country Tranquility, the artist recreates the scene of a lone zebra grazing by a waterhole while a bank of storm clouds builds on the horizon. Almost all of her landscapes are a blending of both oils and acrylics. Previous pages: Civilization and wilderness collide in Approach, Gradwell's painting of Cape buffalo strolling past an African farm.



landscapes have attracted attention in the U.S., she is equally known in South Africa for her still-lifes, seascapes, and botanical pieces. Her work is part of prominent private, corporate, public, and diplomatic collections in South Africa, Europe, and the U.S.

“My work reflects a constant echoing between human beings and the environment. Time, space, light, color, and texture are constant companions when approaching a painting,” she explains. “I do not have the assurance of knowing what the end product will be. Each painting is a process that leads me to a different conclusion—therefore I do not paint from a photograph but rather according to the resonance I experience when standing at a site.

“I attempt to impress upon the imagination of the viewer words like ‘majestic,’ ‘awe-inspiring,’ ‘magnificent,’ ‘stupendous,’ or ‘extraordinary’ with paint.”

This year Call of Africa’s Native Visions Galleries will unveil a new selection of Gradwells during the sporting show season at Dallas Safari Club and SCI, where Parker will be celebrating 30 years of involvement with the hunting

and fishing industry. Then in March his galleries in Naples and Jupiter also will be having a major exhibition of African art featuring the work of Gradwell and others in his stable.

“Wildlife art need not be the same-old, same-old,” Parker says. “As Margaret shows, it can be timeless.” ■

Gradwell created thick slashes and swirls of paint in this impressionistic piece, titled Silent Advance. Below: The artist brushed in a dazzling array of bright colors in Tentative Respite.

