

Montana

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Fiction by Milana Marsenich

ART

"I just love masks," says artist Stephanie Campbell. Campbell says she taught theater in Africa twice and has been collecting African masks that now decorate her Bozeman home and inspire her work.

FACE to FACE

Mask-making is in the bones of Bozeman artist Stephanie Campbell

BY CYNTHIA LOGAN

PHOTOGRAPHY BY THOMAS LEE

SITTING CROSS-LEGGED ON THE FLOOR OF HER upstairs home studio, Bozeman multi-media artist Stephanie Campbell looks almost like a teenager. Surrounded by baggies, Tupperware, takeout containers, shoe boxes, shopping bags and woven baskets filled with seed pods, obsidian, argillite, quartz, glass beads, honeycomb and fungi, the 70-year-old radiates curiosity, energy and a sense of adventure.

Her chiweenie Sadie (a mini-dachshund/chihuahua) is nestled in the crook where Campbell's black pants meet a grey gauzy top, her coloring complementing Campbell's outfit. Flowerpots hold dried mushrooms, bark, and Campbell's current passion: mangamo tree seeds. Feathers sprout from a long-empty can of Spam, while a plastic drawer unit keeps smaller items tidy. Family photos smile down upon the creative, contained clutter.

"I'm ultra-organized as a theater director, but when I'm playing with materials this place can look really chaotic," says Campbell, who uses these found treasures to decorate the masks she's been making since retiring four years ago as a Montana State University professor.

In addition to teaching acting and directing, Campbell taught mask, mime & movement classes using professionally made character masks. An actor herself, she has held mask workshops at Wellesley College in Boston and at Massey University in Auckland, New Zealand, as well as in Bozeman. But her creations are not character masks. You wouldn't wear one to a masquerade. They are heavy, yet delicate, meant to be mounted on walls or tables. And



The Moment of Creation

they are spirit masks, carrying what Campbell believes is healing energy.

Each begins as a painted plaster cast of her own face.

"I make six face plasters at a time," she says. It's messy—you have to do it outside, put Vaseline all over your face (extra on eyebrows and lashes), then carefully place the gauze soaked with wet plaster, let it dry and remove it. She wears a shower cap and smock, "cuz it's



Extinct



Perpetua

“Early on, in my enthusiasm, I’d overdo it. If it had a little lichen, more had to be better. When I got confidence, I got serious about my materials. Now I find I’m trying for simplicity.”

all gonna drip.” After removing the plaster, she refines ragged edges. Once the cast is complete, Campbell searches out a base, such as the Montana-sourced cow’s skull and antelope jaw bones used in the piece called *The Moment of Creation* that resides above the keyboard at actor/musician Roerick Sweeney’s home.

“I love the creative aura it instills; there’s a nice vibe when I have guys over to practice,” he says. Also an actor, producer and director (and stand-up comedian), Sweeney bought the piece during an emotional, trying time in 2018 when he was working 13-hour days producing, directing and acting in a play. Having collaborated with Campbell over the years, he was familiar with her new venture. Five minutes after browsing her mask artistry website, he knew that acquiring the piece would instill some calm.

The piece at Sweeney’s house “honors that fertile ground from which new ideas and circumstances spring ... it’s always born from a pregnant burst of energy to propel us forward, upward, onward,” Campbell wrote of it. That description really spoke to Sweeney.

“It’s a friendly presence,” he says of the mask, which is embellished with decaying leaves, wild boar tusks from Hawaii, tiny shell beads from Africa, argillite, river stones and forest lichen from Montana.

“I’ve been blown away by the care and intricacies of each mask,” he enthuses. “I think it’s fascinating—each material has its own story as well as the piece itself.”

Most materials are sourced during excursions Campbell takes with her husband, Doug Morley. The two regularly visit Hawaii and love to camp (well, glamp); they’re ardent mushroom hunters, but other materials are discovered rather than deliberately sought. And some are gifts, like the *Bison Occidentalis* skull, which paleontologists estimate to be between 5,000 and 11,000 years old, that serves as the base for *Extinct*, one of Campbell’s simplest creations.

“This skull has an almost petrified quality and is a true relic from an ice age North American buffalo,” she states in its online description. “Just imagine the truly ancient animal that roamed this country thousands of years ago ... now extinct but remembered and honored in



Argonaut



Blue Balancer



Bridge of Honor



West

this time and place. I've only added painted glass and a few dried seedpods."

Campbell usually completes one mask before starting another, but she sometimes works on two simultaneously. She uses a hot glue gun to adhere elements (Suave hair-spray for feathers).

"Early on, in my enthusiasm, I'd overdo it," she says with a laugh. "If it had a little lichen, more had to be better. When I got confidence, I got serious about my materials. Now I find I'm trying for simplicity."

Blue Balancer comprises just her face plaster and a sheep's pelvis, spine and vertebrae. "I used so few materials because I had just finished an extremely complicated and busy mask with many intricacies and multiple points the viewer's eye could explore. I wanted to balance that; when playing with my available materials, the mask just fit, nestled and supported in the strength of the bone cradle, and nothing else was needed."

She never knows what a piece is going to look like but says, "I'll feel a rumbling of some kind and it comes out like that [she points to a mask-in-progress with red stripes across the face]. To me, this could be Native American, African or even western." Campbell's work is influenced by her travels to Africa and South America, particularly Brazil and Peru.

"Oooh, you want to see something really cool?" She pops up to proffer a pelican's sternum. "Feel how light that is." Her attention moves to a box filled with bones; she

selects two and presents them after a dramatic pause, her voice lowered almost reverently: "Boar tusks." As we head downstairs, she cautions, "Be sure to shut that door—Sadie will eat the feathers."

Nearly every surface—walls, mantle, table tops, kitchen and bath counters, even the garage pegboard—sports one of the 60 masks Campbell has made since she took an art class at Process Studio in Bozeman with Collette Brooks-Hops.

"Here is my original project," she says, pointing to a double mask on the wall near the mantle. That's my face on the left, and Doug's on the right." It's the only mask with a face other than hers.

Featured prominently near the kitchen (and slightly off kilter) is *West*, her favorite. "I'll never sell this one," she says. "Look at this little beaver skull on the bottom. And this Iberville shale is found near Lake Champlain. I fill my pockets when I visit my daughter in Vermont."

After earning an undergraduate degree in art from the University of Northern Colorado in 1970, Campbell graduated with an MFA in both acting and directing from the University of Arizona at Tucson in 1983. A single mom with two children, she arrived in Bozeman later that year, expecting to stay three to five years, but "fell in love with Bozeman," and her appointment at MSU was a comfortable fit. "I'm still involved in acting and directing—that's my comfort zone," she says.

Though her work has been featured in numerous shows,



Campbell inside her Bozeman studio. Her own face is embedded in her masks, making them "part of a family."

Campbell prefers having one or two of her masks included in other artists' exhibits. Her debut at Bozeman's 2018 SLAM (Support Local Artists & Musicians) Festival was smashing: she sold nine masks in two days. "It wasn't about making money," she says, "but I felt validated. After

that, I determined I was only going to do this for fun. It's fun to do a gallery show, but I'm not pushing for it. Besides, transporting them is a bitch."

Asked how it feels to have her own face embedded within each of the masks, Campbell says; "Of course it's



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an extension of me, cuz I made it, but to me they're all part of a family."

One family member seems particularly up close and personal: Perched on the jawbone of an elk, and peering unabashedly from between two pheasant wings, the red face in *Perpetua* is startling. Adorned with coral, shale, and wood from Montana river shores, she asks us to consider the perpetual cycles we see in our lives. Campbell's take? "She offers the wisdom and strength to delete from our 'personal files' that which no longer serves a creative purpose in our lives, and to re-energize activities, beliefs and routines that do."

During a low period in her life, Bozeman astrologer Margot Darling came across Campbell's *Woman of Courage*. Now freestanding among many rocks, the mask is the "masthead" on Darling's home altar. "Woman of courage, that's me," she declares. Darling loves the antlers and that the mask is placed over the top of a deer skull. "I like the idea that we're all just animals wearing a mask of humanness. I think the mask symbolism is deep; they come in layers ... we unmask ourselves to reveal a different mask."

The blue color also drew her, along with dried lavender and sweet peas from Campbell's garden, and the green tree lichen from the Bridger Mountains. For Campbell, the mask honors what it takes to blend the self we show to the world with the hidden, private self. "When we choose to be transparently honest, we allow both sides to show, enabling truer communication, something that takes great courage."

Campbell loved the process of using two masks in *Bridge of Honor*: "That they are so close to each other automatically creates both a physical and an emotional bridge," she says. "I love the knot-holed wood with insect-bored trails that look like Egyptian hieroglyphics, which provided a large background base to play on."

The antelope skull and horns used for *Argonaut*, adorned with white shell fragments, black river stones and black sand, rest upon a piece of slate from Montana. Its intent is to acknowledge those who take risks, who trust enough to leap into the unknown to pursue their dreams or address an in-the-moment situation that needs remedy. It celebrates the adventure in all of us.

Campbell is clearly a woman of courage and an intrepid adventurer, both in the world around her and in her inner landscape, where she journeys to discover what her creations wish to express. Whether her mask artistry is considered folk art, shamanic art, sculpture, or multi-media art, matters little. To Stephanie Campbell, each mask is just another blood relative. Creativity courses through her bloodline; masks are in her bones. ■



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